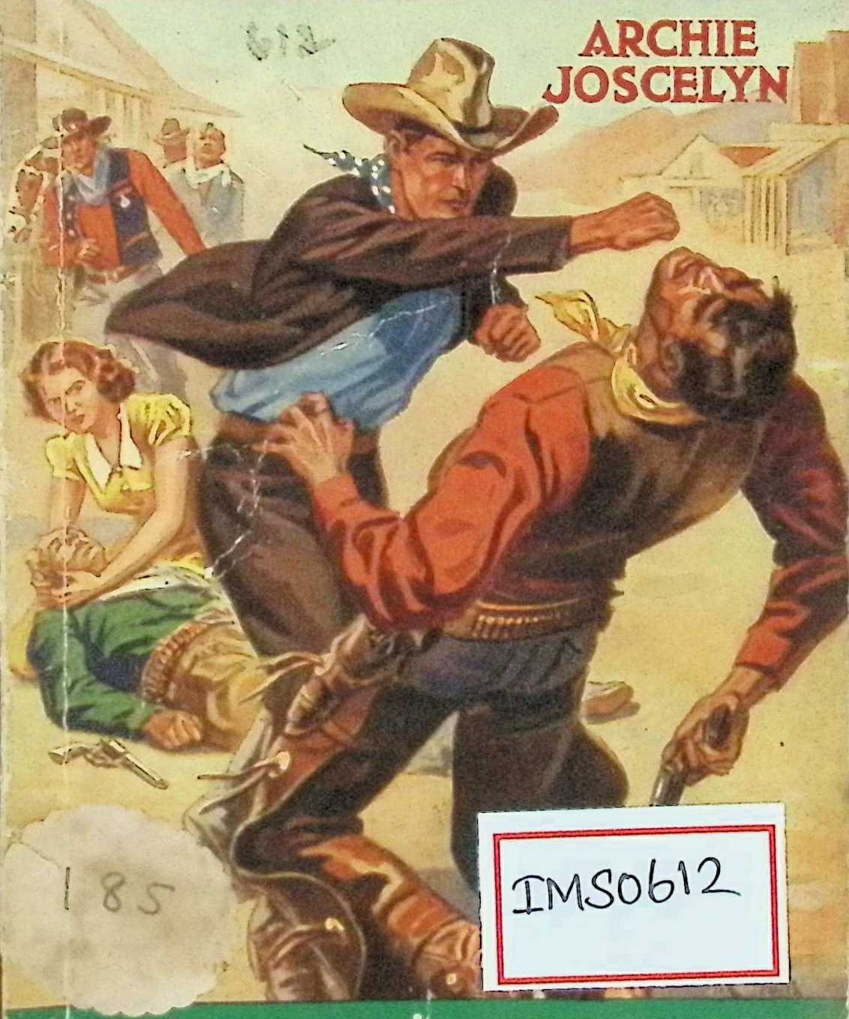
THE SAWBONES OF DESOLATE RANGE

ARCHIE JOSCELYN



WARD LOCK'S WESTERNS

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by

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CHAPTER I

THE KNIFE THAT SLIPPED

BEHIND, the faint pound of hoofs on the hardbaked prairie was growing gradually louder, coming with a steady insistence like the rising beat of drums of doom. Overhead, a pale moon flitted among a ghostly mist of fainting stars, but the cloud-wrack which, an hour before, had given some promise of thicker darkness, was being torn to shreds by a wind that, rarely twisting down to ruffle the grass, moaned in a high blast high overhead, like the wail of lost souls.

Lance Prescott's sobbing horse stumbled, almost went to its knees, came staggeringly up again. Lance knew the signs. It had made a good run—a mighty good run, but the poor old cayuse was just about played out. Running now on heart alone.

He glanced back, and his lean, rather handsome face seemed to go a little thinner, frosty grey eyes narrowing. He could see the line of the mob spread out behind, now. A bullet sang thinly past, its waspish hum not close, not far off, the dull crack of the gun followed like a mocking whisper.

Ahead was the dull blue line of foothills. Too far ahead. An hour before, with the cloud-wrack thickening, he'd hoped to reach them—and a chance to go on living. Now both looked to be about equally out of the question.

Thoughtfully, Lance eyed the gunny-sack which he still clutched in one hand, made to toss it away. No need to

cling to that any longer. He'd been a fool to bring it, in the first place. It had nearly cost him his neck, where without it he might have slipped through in safety. That error probably would prevent him seeing another sunrise.

His mind went back, in a weary circle, as it had done so many times before. It seemed somehow incredible that, only a few days ago, he had been successful, respected, the future an assured thing. And then the black curse of the Prescotts had caught up with him. The thing which he carried now in the sack had betrayed him—or had he betrayed himself?

Curiously, almost with a sense of detachment, he opened the mouth of the sack, looked in. Yes, it was just the same as it had always been—the compact, professional black bag of the physician. He knew exactly what it contained, down to the last item. He closed the the bag again. No need to throw it away now.

Another bullet sang past. No closer than the other, no farther away. They were in range, all right, but shooting in this tricky light wasn't so easy. Probably they had guessed that all they needed was to be patient a little longer. That he was about at the end of his rope. Well, he might as well hang on to the damned thing, die with it. It couldn't hurt him any more.

His mind went back to that last operation which he had performed, with the crowd looking on—somehow they had reminded him that night of a wolf pack, waiting for the kill—stern, hard men, insisting that he operate, brushing aside his plea for a few hours sleep first, his insistence that he was too exhausted to be either safe or sure.

It had been Doc Griggs who had egged them on, who had made him do it, regardless of those twenty-four hours in the saddle. Griggs, with his broken arm in a sling, his hand raised like that of a man pronouncing judgment:

"You wait, and it'll be murder. You got to operate now. Hell, man, you can do it. If it was my other

arm, even, I could do it."

Well, he'd tried, at their insistence. Taking a shot of whisky in an effort to steady his nerves. Even that couldn't steady the shaking fatigue of leaden muscles. He'd known well enough that he was in no shape to operate, but the girl would die if he didn't. And then—right at the critical moment—he shut his eyes in a hopeless effort to close out the memory—his hand had slipped.

Even now, and despite all the factors, he couldn't quite understand that part of it. But it had happened. That was all that mattered. They had called it murder.

If they only knew how right they were! Murder. It had been bad enough for the girl, God knew—though he had done the best he could, after being awake three days and two nights, and the last twenty-four hours in the saddle. She'd had little enough chance at best, for her appendix had ruptured before he ever got there. Even if his hand hadn't slipped, her chances would have been slight enough, with the skill of any man at his best.

Murder. That slip of the knife had killed something in him—something without which no man, and especially a physician, could live. Confidence in himself, in his ability. It was a crazy thing, of course, for it to happen that way, or to shake him as it had. Maybe it was the combination of the whole thing—his own overpowering weariness, the life slipping away beneath his hands, that jolt of whisky, the accusing voice of Doc Griggs——

"You've murdered her!"

For her, it had been easy. Just dying. But to go on living, after having killed yourself—that was plain hell. And yet, with the odd perversity of nature, he was still fighting to go on living, when it would be so much simpler, and better, all round, to let them lynch him. As they aimed to do.

He'd half expected it, there that night, under the bitter indictment of Doc Griggs. That accusation had left him dazed, too tired even to think. But they had let him stumble away to bed, to sleep the clock twice around.

Even in that deep, bitter sleep, he'd lived the thing over, had awakened in a nightmare, sweating, dreaming of that slip of the knife—knowing that he was finished.

The trial had come as an anti-climax. What could they do to a man's body when his soul was already broken ? They had called him a disgrace to his profession, had solemnly assured him that he would be disbarred from practice—and then, having proclaimed him a murderer, had let him go.

Let him go—to face the fury of the mob. With such an indictment ringing in his ears, in their ears. Somehow he had evaded them, there at first. The instinct of the hunted, perhaps. And he would have been past the last outpost where danger lurked, if he hadn't held on to that little black bag, badge of his profession, of his failure. Someone had recognized him because of it. And now——

A fusillade of shots, this time. Bullets seeking him. God, if they only knew ! Though he fought against death such as they blindly sought to mete out to him, he'd welcome death—welcome it with open arms, if it would only bring oblivion. But he couldn't feel sure of that, even—he was afraid it would be like that tortured nightmare of sleep. And he was of no mind to die in a noose, not if he could help it.

To just die and end it all would be so easy, if that were all. To be free at last of the curse of the Prescotts. But to go on living, knowing that he couldn't ever be a doctor again—not on account of their solemn proclamation, but because something had died inside of him, severed as surely as the thread of life by that slip of the scalpel—to have only failure to look forward to, despair to look back upon—for a moment he was seriously tempted to turn his horse and face them, hoping that their bullets would finish him and be done with it.

Instead, it was a bullet which finished his horse. He felt the quiver of the doomed beast, sensed the dissolution of its vital energies, then it was sprawling in a heap, and he was shooting over its head to land in another sprawling

heap, the gunny-sack still clutched tightly in his hand.

Yet it was funny, the way his hand had slipped—damned funny. He couldn't understand it. Of course, he wasn't used to whisky, but it had merely steadied him a bit, given him a brace for a few needed minutes. He'd been far too exhausted to get drunk. Well, no need to worry about it any longer. His hand had slipped, and it had been murder. And in a little while they'd have him, and his worries would be over.

He could hear them yelling now, hoarsely, an insane triumph shrilling through the jangle of it. They aimed to hang him for murder, never stopping to think that they would be murdering him. And the worst of it was, they had stopped shooting. It wouldn't be so bad, to go out by a bullet, but to hang at the end of a rope was different.

Wearily, almost resignedly he was crawling on hands and knees, through the tangle of brown buckbrush which grew in a thick mat here. A few of the white berries crushed pulpily beneath his palms, but he scarcely noticed. He couldn't hope to get away, of course, And he was still dragging that gunny-sack along with him. The thing was funny, how a man would cling to something like that, through all sorts of trouble.

Then, to his amazement, he was falling. That was funny, too, for he had figured that this was all level prairie, mile on mile yet.

He brought up with a little jolt amid sliding dirt which showered around him and made a dust cloud in his face. He lay passive, too tired almost to care. Looking up, he could see that he hadn't fallen more than three or four feet. This was just a little crack in the earth, only a few feet long, hardly wide enough for him to get into. Such things happened, sometimes.

The mob was all around overhead now, talking, exclaiming, searching. He could hear the swish of horses' legs through the brush, the impatient jingle of bridles, a softer tinkle of spurs, creak of saddle leather, the snorting of the cayuses—all a familiar background to

the fury of suddenly baffled men.

Lance lay quietly, waiting for them to find him. It was only a matter of time, of course, just a little time. Then they'd drag him out, and after that——

He realized, with dull amazement that he no longer heard voices. Patches of the brown buckbrush stretched endlessly here, and they seemed to figure that he had kept crawling in that, and the search had spread out, uncertain now. Somehow they had missed finding this crack into which he had fallen.

Dr. Lance Prescott closed his eyes wearily, slept. After all, it didn't matter so much, one way or another. A man could only die once—and death of the body couldn't be half as bad as what he had already gone through. They'd come back pretty soon, find him——

He blinked, sat up, conscious that some alien sound had awakened him. Then he saw it—a dog, up above there, watching him. As he stirred, it slunk away. Then he recognized it. No dog, but a coyote. Probably it had been speculating as to whether he was cold meat, or not.

Coyote ! That meant that the searchers had given up and gone, long since. In some amazement, he climbed stiffly out of the hole, looked around. The coyote was slinking away, still turning to watch him reproachfully. Overhead, the moon had vanished, the cloud-wrack was thickening again. A faint luminosity in the east proclaimed the nearing dawn.

He was alive ! And beyond the borders of the country where many men knew him, or his history. A faintly sardonic smile played over Lance Prescott's face. He turned towards the distant outline of the hills, plodded on. The gunny-sack was still clutched tight in one hand.

CHAPTER II

DESOLATE RANGE

DUST rose up in little puffs from the horses' hooves, from the turning stage-wheels—white alkali dust that lay like a blighting frost across the vegetation fringing the roadside. It was everywhere, mile on mile of it, across these easy sloping, folded hills. Looking out on it, as he swayed to the pitch and roll of the stage, it required no stretch of the imagination for Lance Prescott to know that this was the beginning of Desolate Range.

"It stretches for fifty miles, both ways out from Windspur, the country that God forgot," the driver on the box had said in answer to a passenger's question. "If yuh're headin' that way, take my advice and keep on straight through. It ain't no country for a white man."

Lance was beginning to believe him as he viewed it now. As a matter of fact he was heading for Windspur, the bleakest town in the middle of the bleakest country that ever lay outdoors. A country where both men and nature conspired to make a bad matter worse. In this forgotten land, unknown, he could get a job punching cows, and be sunk deep in oblivion. That would mean existence, though hardly life.

There had been another reason in the back of his mind. It was to Desolate Range that his father had first come when he had reached this country. And somewhere in here the black curse of the Prescotts had first fallen upon the family.

The first dark chapter was pretty much a mystery to Lance. They had left here when he was only a toddler. But in the back of his mind was a desire to see this fell country where misfortune had seemed to spring from, to somehow come to grips with the thing that had spelled

doom for his family, that still seemed to be bringing ruin to himself.

It was a strange, intangible thing, that curse—a blight laid on a strong man by a fanatic who had fancied himself wronged. But Gunning Prescott had found it to be no idle threat. Ruin, a strange and awful death. And that same fate had stalked the others of the clan Prescott. He alone was left, and ruin had clutched at him in these last days. Lance shrugged.

A couple of miles back, at the last stop to change horses, the driver had viewed him questioningly almost with pity.

"Yuh mean to say yuh're really stoppin' at Windspur—and stayin'?"

"I figure on it, pard."

"Not meanin' tuh *live* there, are yuh?"

"Calc'late to."

Incredulity edged the driver's voice as he swung back on to the box.

"Yuh don't look crazy, hombre—but anybody'd go to Windspur that didn't have to——" He shook his head and left the sentence unfinished.

Desolate Range was all that the name implied. That was easy to see as they rolled across it. Yet, scattered across its wide miles were occasional rich ranches, and men inhabited the country. A wild border land beyond the law, which meant that it was the place for him.

Windspur was ahead—appropriately named, treeless, where the heat devils danced in a cloak of dust by Summer and cold clamped down by Winter, knifing across the bleakness on the heels of winds which writhed in torment like the riven range they crossed. Half a dozen saloons, a few stores, a scattering of shacks—mostly unpainted, with but one redeeming feature. The white dust did not extend here; the water, for Desolate Range, was good.

Above the drumming tattoo of twenty-four hoofs on the hard-packed road sounded a sharper crash, the

bitterly familiar bark of a six-gun. While its echo was fading, the stage pulled to a stop not fifty feet away, in a cloud of dust.

Lance stepped out, gunny-sack clutched in one hand, his eyes sweeping the scene before him. This had all the look of a street brawl, at first glance, but on second it was something more than that—something more in keeping with this range's reputation.

One man, fairly tall but thickset, grey-haired, dressed in cowhide chaps, Mexican style, and coatless, lay in the dust in the middle of the street, sprawling in a little spreading pool of his own blood. His own big Colt was on the ground, just beside the holster, as though, clawing desperately for it, he had half dragged it clear of the leather, then it had slid on out as he fell, slipped from the grip of lax fingers.

Standing three or four paces away, smoking gun still in hand, gazing around with a truculence like that of a disturbed grizzly, was a man remarkable for his mighty shoulders and ape-like arms. Thick black hair fell in disorder around his eyes, a second holster was full.

Behind him, huddled against the buildings, were perhaps a dozen onlookers who had been attracted more by the coming of the stage than by the shot. They were palpably, almost shiveringly nervous—men who stared but made no move to come forward or to interfere in any way.

Lance hesitated, getting a grip on himself. His impulse was to take a hand in this. It looked like the cold-blooded work of a bully, and there was about it the rank odour of deliberate murder. The instinct of the man was to intervene, the instinct of the healer to help the wounded man. But this was no time to be a fool.

"Steady!" he adjured himself. "Go butting into what's none of your business and you're just setting that noose around your neck again. You can't help that hombre unless you patch him up—and likely not then—and if you do that, somebody'll know you! Besides,

it's not your quarrel.''

That was common sense. It was more than that. It was the first and oldest law of the race—the law of self-preservation. But even as he fought against that first impulse to take a hand, there was a shift in the scene as a new actor appeared on the boards.

A sharp, half-strangled cry of fear and dismay rang out—a cry which held a poignantly stirring quality in it; then, with quick running feet, a girl had appeared from nowhere and, disregarding the hulking figure of the gunman, had dropped on her knees in the dust, beside the still figure sprawled there.

For an instant she bent down, started to cradle that limp grey head in her arms, then looked up again through a mist of tears. She was, Lance saw then, really more than a girl—a woman of twenty or so, and plainly the wounded man's daughter, for there was the same broad forehead, the straight nose above a mouth of determined character, blue eyes now sparkling through the mist, brown hair instead of grey.

"Oh," she cried, looking around on the others, and for an instant her gaze seemed to pierce the shambling figure of the gunman, so that he took an uneasy step back. "What have you done? You coward!"

Swiftly her gaze picked on the bystanders behind, appealingly.

"Help me," she urged. "Help me get him inside. Can't somebody do something? *Won't* you help me—any of you?"

Not a man had stirred before that poignant appeal. Eyes were averted, feet shuffled, but as the gunman took a truculent step forward again, one hand still clutching the smoking weapon, they seemed like a nervous flock of sheep, about to break and run.

"This ain't no place for a girl," he growled. "Get out o' here and leave him alone!"

"I'll not leave him alone, Ape Narcross!" the girl blazed. "You—you murderer!"

Ape, long arms hanging loosely, blinked for a moment. Rage inflamed his eyes, he took another step towards where, on her feet now, she faced him defiantly.

" Get out o' here before I fill him so full uh lead he'll do tuh mine," Ape snarled. " I won't have nobody interferin'——"

One long arm was reaching out for her shoulder. Lance saw the fear in her eyes, stark and naked, even while she stood her ground, and something in him snapped. Before he quite knew how it happened, he was beside them, his own fingers, closing on Ape's shoulder, bulging with muscle, spun him around and sent him staggering back.

With suddenly breathless interest, seeing Lance for the first time, the girl viewed him, the gunny-sack twisted and held tight in one hand, his eyes, blazing now like her own, which seemed to have some of the foggy quality of the alkali dust ; his jaw a jut that at the moment rather marred the good looks of the rest of his face. Not a big man, by Windspur standards, or compared to the man he was facing, but somehow he had a big look.

The breathlessness in the girl's eyes seemed to increase as she looked at him. Sudden excitement sent returning colour to her cheeks, and she seemed, for the moment, to have forgotten the sullen Narcross.

" Oh," she breathed. " You—you're Doctor Prescott, aren't you ? Now my dad will live ! "

CHAPTER III

THE BLACK CURSE

LANCE was staggered. His action had been purely instinctive. It was not in his nature to stand there and see a bully manhandle a girl, after shooting her father. Taking part in such a row was apt to get him a handful of trouble, but that aspect of it didn't worry him particularly. He could do that as just another wandering cow waddy, and it would have no wider implications than what had happened in the next few minutes.

Or so he had thought, until this girl, whom he had never seen nor heard of before, had looked at him with that light in her eyes and called him by name and title.

For an instant he was tempted to deny it. To tell her that she had been mistaken in thinking to recognize him. He had already stepped into enough trouble, in tangling with Ape Narcross, whom it was apparent that everybody else was afraid of, and probably with good reason. To go under his true name and identity would be the height of folly.

But in that same instant he knew that he'd ride this new trail to the end, whatever that might be. Something in her face, in her words, told him the truth. That here, in Windspur, there was no other medico, no chance at all to save her father's life, unless he took a hand in his professional capacity. And he couldn't turn her down.

Ape was still staring, as though unable to believe what had happened to him. In another moment or so he'd recover, and be dangerous. But Lance didn't wait. He dropped on his knees beside the fallen man, ignoring the towering gunman.

For a minute, he made a swift, professional survey, turned to rip open the twisted gunny-sack and drag out the black bag, all with a cold detachment which amazed

him. Just a few days ago he had felt that, whatever the chance given, he could never do this sort of thing again, that it was all beyond him. What had happened to him ? Something of the need in that girl's soul seemed to have been transmitted through her eyes to him, a healing touch—but he had no time to wonder about it.

He applied first aid to the bleeding wound, without once glancing up. While he worked, he was acutely aware that the girl had dropped to her knees again, just across the inert form of her father from him, that she was watching, with divided but intent interest, first his hands, then his face.

There was something in her eyes, the serene confidence and faith in them, which steadied him to the task. Surely, without the impetus of that look he would have faltered now, as he had been sure would be the case if he ever tried to do this sort of thing again. Well, he'd never thought to have to try it under such conditions, certainly.

The driver of the stage, who had watched thus far with interest, now deposited some baggage on the plank sidewalk, swung regretfully to his box again, cracked his whip, and the stage was off in a fresh cloud of dust. The onlookers had advanced a few curious paces, their attention about equally divided between this brash stranger and Ape Narcross, who still clutched his gun.

Ape had stared in astonishment as the doctor turned from him and went to work For a moment his face was blank with amazement, the rage wiped off of it. Now a scowl twisted it again, and he took a swift step, to tower over the three at his feet. His voice held the throaty challenge of an angry grizzly.

"What the devil do yuh mean, anyway ?"

Lance glanced up briefly, then went on with his work.

For a moment, the gunman appeared puzzled by this attitude. It was outside the whole range of his experience.

"When I shoot a man, he stays shot," he pronounced.

"Does he ?"

"He sure does. And I don't tolerate no interference."

"Meaning you're a murderer?"

It took a moment to digest this, but when it had been assimilated, it didn't seem to set so well. Ape's face darkened.

"Get up and leave him alone, hombre—before I fill yuh full of lead, too."

The girl was watching him with that same intent expression—and confidence. Though he hadn't looked directly at her, Lance was well aware of it. He glanced up again.

"Who the devil do you think you are?"

That question, too, appeared to be a bit staggering. But the answer, though delayed, was a more menacing growl.

"I'm Ape Narcross, of the Neckyoke."

"Ape, eh? It fits." The doctor was busy bandaging the wound now.

"Are you going to get up—or do I have to kill yuh?"

Lance closed his bag with a snap. He came to his feet like a steer on the prod, and as he came up, his right fist was aimed, expertly, for the point of the jaw above—aimed with the scientific knowledge of just where and how to achieve his effect. The connection made a crack clearly audible to every onlooker, and Ape Narcross, a slow look of amazement filtering again across his heavy face, wobbled drunkenly on his legs.

The doctor appraised him a moment, but did not bother to strike again. Instead, he reached out, twitched the gun from Ape's lax fingers, and stuck it back in the holster.

"Get out of here, and don't bother me again," he ordered shortly, and swung on the gaping onlookers, his jaw jutting again. "Get a door, or something, and help me carry this man up to a room. Step lively now."

Before the incisiveness in his voice they hastened to obey. There were tears in the girl's eyes as she came to

her feet again, but even the tears could not hide a sparkle, and her lips twisted in a tremulous smile.

"I—I can't ever thank you for what you've done, Doctor Prescott," she said. "But I think God must have sent you here, just when you were needed."

They were coming with a door, and five minutes later the wounded man was in bed on the floor above the Windspur Saloon, and Lance, washing his hands in a basin in an adjoining room, had learned several things in that length of time.

He catalogued these mentally as he returned and proceeded now to cut away the coat and shirt and set to work on a more thorough dressing of his patient's wound. He had sent the girl on an errand, not that it was important, but to get her away, give her something else to do and a chance to steady herself, while with hot water furnished by the bar-tender, he got the worst of this job attended to.

It was a nasty wound at best, the heavy .45 slug having struck below the left shoulder, a little above the heart. The shock of it had been bad enough, and the loss of blood had made it worse. Left alone a few minutes longer, Reese MacVeigh would have slipped from unconsciousness, straight across the boundary that marked the long trail west.

Even now, for a few days, it would be touch and go, whether he lived or died. MacVeigh, it seemed, was owner of the big Broken Chain Ranch, one of the two biggest outfits in the country. He had been shot down, deliberately, cold-bloodedly, by Ape Narcross of the Neckyoke, the other big outfit. There had been bad blood between the two outfits for a long time, and Ape was the killer of the Neckyoke—openly employed and recognized as such.

Ape had encountered the rancher there in the street, had challenged him, giving him no choice but to go for his gun—a hopeless choice, for Ape was twice as fast on the draw. It had been intended for murder, deliberately

planned and executed, and not one of the onlookers had dared raise hand or voice in protest.

One of them, who had helped carry the wounded man up to the bed, had tarried for a brief parting word of advice.

"I like yore guts, Doc—but if yuh want to go on livin' better get out of this country as quick as yuh can straddle a cayuse. Don't wait for the next stage to-morrow."

Lance smiled bleakly. If they only knew how good that advice was !

Another refrain was running through his head. MacVeigh ! Randall ! The owners of the two big outfits in this country—bitter enemies ! The MacVeighs and the Randalls had come to Desolate Range at about the same time as his father, Gunning Prescott. He had heard of them. And they, like his father, had come under the black curse of Danny Darrel. What did it mean ?

Danny Darrel had been in his grave these long years. But his curse, it seemed, lived on. Lance shivered a little, despite himself. He didn't, as a man of science, believe in such things. But from bitter experience, he wasn't so sure.

The wound bandaged to his satisfaction, he looked around. He'd started this job, and he supposed he'd have to finish it. If he were allowed to. And it had been the look in a girl's eyes that had persuaded him ! He turned at her step on the stair, which ran down the outside of the building at the side, saw that her mouth was quivering a little.

"How is he ? " she asked. "For a minute I was so excited that I hardly stopped to think—but that was such an awful-looking wound."

"It's pretty bad," Lance admitted gravely. "He will probably remain unconscious for a day or so, which is a good thing for him"

The girl walked to the bedside, dropped on her knees beside it, both hands clasping her father's limp hand

where it lay on the cover, staring with wide eyes at his white face. Slowly she lifted them to Lance.

"He—he looks terrible," she said. "Is he—is there any chance, Doctor ?"

"He has a fighting chance, given proper care."

"He must have that. We'll pay whatever is necessary. Only see that he gets it."

"I'll do my best."

"Can I—will it be all right if I stay here and nurse him ? There are only the two of us, you see."

Lance looked around at the rooms. There were three of them, here above the saloon. This, and two across a narrow hall. There was the bed in here, a stand with cracked bowl and pitcher, a cracked mirror hanging askew above it; the window was free of any curtain. One straight chair, and a coating of long-undisturbed dust over everything. The other rooms were much the same.

On rare occasions these were rented out, he supposed. The rough floor, the unfinished walls, the bleakness of the scene outside—Desolate Range. The place was well named.

"It will be the finest thing in the world, for him. You can stay here with him. I'll have them bring up a screen and an extra bed, or cot."

"Thank you." She looked up at him again, noting those keen grey eyes, the uncompromising jut to his chin. But for that chin, he would be handsome, and he wasn't old—not over thirty, at most. She repeated almost what she had said before.

"It was providence, you coming here just when you did. I can't ever thank you for what you've already done. We—the last doctor we had here, Doctor Van Scoy—it got too much for him, I think, the bleakness. He left nearly a year ago."

Lance made no comment. She asked another question.

"Were—were you just passing through—to see a patient somewhere ?"

Lance turned, looking at her curiously.

"No. I came here to stay." He knew, with a curious sense of finality, that he had come home, that somehow his destiny was in this place. "How did you happen to know me?"

"I'm Mavis MacVeigh," she explained. "I visited a cousin, a couple of years ago, down in Rimrock, and I saw you there. You didn't see me, of course. But I remember it so well." Her eyes were dreamy now. "A drunken cowboy had been riding down the street, and he had run over a little dog. A little girl had just picked it up in her arms and was crying as if her heart would break, and you came along. You took the dog and the child both up in your arms, and told her not to cry, that you would fix it up all right, although it looked as if its leg was broken."

Mavis looked up to flash him a quick smile.

"I'll never forget the look on your face—so kind and reassuring, almost like a god—or the way that little child was looking up at you, almost as though she worshipped you, just like the dog did—it was trying to reach up and lick you face. I—I couldn't ever forget you after that, Doctor Pescott."

Lance Prescott turned abuptly, staring out of the window sightlessly, his hands, in his coat pockets, clenched to gripping fists. She couldn't know, of course, how she was turning a knife in a raw wound. That poor little kid—she had trusted him, and now she was dead—because his hand had slipped. He seemed to hear again the denunciation in Doc Grigg's harsh voice:

"You've murdered her!"

"You were so well known, there in Rimrock, so well liked," Mavis went on. "Are you going to set up in practice here in Windspur—where a doctor is so desperately needed?"

Lance turned, almost casually.

"Looks like they did need a medico here," he agreed. "So why not?"

CHAPTER IV

RANDALL'S BRIBE

MAVIS MacVeigh smiled at him, but her face was suddenly very grave.

"There's no question of that," she agreed. "But I'm afraid that you've gotten off to a very bad start here. The Neckyoke outfit seems to be getting the upper hand in this country—and you couldn't have done anything to antagonize them more than by taking care of Dad."

"Quarrels aren't a doctor's business—except to patch people up afterward."

"It isn't so simple as that. And Dave Randall will resent your trying to save Dad's life."

"Randall owns the Neckyoke?"

"Yes. He owns most of this country—including the people who live in it—body and soul."

"Is he as bad as he sounds?"

To his surprise, Mavis hesitated.

"I—I hardly know. His friends swear by him, his enemies hate him. You—you see, he lost his son, Sam, about six months ago. Sam disappeared, nobody knows how or where. Dave is certain that someone on the Broken Chain bushwhacked Sam. And he has sworn to run the Broken Chain off the earth."

"That's reason enough for him to feel bitter, if he believes that. Do you believe it?"

"No. I know it isn't so. But you see how it is."

Lance saw. Here was the black curse of Danny Darrel, still at work. The mere difference of a couple hundred miles of range made no difference there, it seemed.

It looked as though he had stepped from one mess of trouble into another. But he knew that he would stay and face it. After all, what was the use of running? If fate intended you for a doctor, it looked as though it would make one of you. And if he was slated to hang,

what more appropriate place for such a final act than here on Desolate Range?

He had made no arrangement for these vacant rooms, but since Reese MacVeigh couldn't be moved for some time, he had better see about it. There were four rooms up here, he saw on further examination, a small one that he had taken for a closet opening off the one where MacVeigh lay.

If he wanted to go on as a doctor, the two across the hall would serve him as office and living quarters. He descended the stairs, turned into the saloon. A few onlookers eyed him curiously as he beckoned to Casey, the bartender, whose head gleamed round and shiny as a Bermuda onion, and who peered jovially out from under a patch where one eye had formerly been. The other eye was genial and deeply blue.

"What'll it be?" he inquired. "Name it, and the first one's on the house, to a brave man, begorra."

"Nothing, thanks, Casey. But since I seem to have moved into your rooms upstairs, I thought I'd better do something about it. Do you have the renting of them?"

"If ye call it that, since there hadn't been a soul in them for the last six months till ye come along. They being empty, it was plumb all right to take Mac up there."

"Thanks. But I'd like to rent them."

"Yez mean the whole floor?"

"Yes. For office and living quarters."

"Sure. No reason why not—from my standpoint. Are yez aimin' to set up as a medico here?"

"I figure on it."

"Well, we sure need a medicine man in these parts, begorra. Yez can talk to the boss when he comes in, about price, but he'll make it right, since there's so little call for them, anyway."

"I can move right in, then—not but what I've done it already?"

"Don't see any reason why not."

Lance nodded, turned, and left the saloon. He caught

a remark of one of the bystanders.

"One sure thing, he's got an eye tuh business. Be handy for most of it, right over the saloon here, and with the Alkali Wash right across the street."

It wouldn't take long to get settled—not with what little he had brought. He had been travelling light, for obvious reasons, but he had some money with him. Lance stepped into the general merchandise store, bought a broom, bucket, mop and a few other small items, and returned, the bucket full from a pump across the street.

So far, no one but Mavis MacVeigh had seemed to know him, or to be interested in who he was or where he was from. Usually, in a country like this, a man was accepted for what he was, not what he had been. Though in any case it would be risky enough under his own name.

He took a look at his patient, saw Mavis go out to get some things, and set work with the mop. The broom would be a help, and it could be used across the hall, but in here with a sick man it would stir up too much dust.

He had finished those two rooms and was sweeping out his own when there were footsteps on the stairway, the door opened and a big man stood there—iron-grey hair a close trimmed moustache, eyes steely as the doctor's own, jutting from under bushy eyebrows. He glanced around the room, his eyes returning to Lance's face, spoke without preamble.

"I'm Dave Randall, of the Neckyoke. I understand you've got Reese MacVeigh here?"

"That's right."

Randall came forward, took a chair casually.

"I just came to make arrangements about him—to make sure that he doesn't get well."

Lance took the only remaining chair, sat back in it, studying his visitor through half-closed eyes. Viewed so, the doctor had almost the look of a sleepy puma and the rancher was quick to detect it.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"I doubt it."

"You look like somebody I've known."

Lance didn't bother to enlighten him. Reese MacVeigh, Dave Randall, Gunning Prescott and Danny Darrel had all been good friends, once—before the curse of Danny Darrel had set enmity between them all.

That blunt statement of Randall's sounded bad, but Lance rather like the frankness of the man who was not afraid to make it.

"You don't waste much time, do you ?"

"I don't aim to beat about the bush," Randall agreed. He made a grimace of distaste. "I don't like the man, and everybody knows it. I didn't send Ape in to kill him—he picked the fight on his own responsibility, and it was damned bad taste, the way he did it, from what I hear. But since it's done, I'm sorry you interfered. What shape is he in ?" He jerked his head towards the other room.

"Pretty bad."

"Any chance of his recovering ?"

"Fair."

"But I take it that he'd die without your care ?"

"Be pretty apt to."

Randall nodded, reached into a pocket and pulled out a long red pocket-book.

"In that case, I'll make it worth your while. Five hundred now, and as much more after the funeral—and nobody will need to guess that you weren't doing your best for him."

"He might die even if I did my best. In that case you'd be wasting your money."

"I'll risk that part of it, and figure I've gotten my money's worth, anyway. Here's the cash."

Randall slapped ten fifty-dollar bills down on the table, replaced his wallet. Lance glanced casually at the money, but made no move to pick it up.

"So you figure that's my price, eh ?"

The cattleman studied him for a moment, brows

twitching together, nodded.

"It's good money," he said. "Ten times more than I'd offer most men."

"My business is to save life—where I can."

Randall lounged back in his chair, watching out of shrewd eyes.

"We need a good medico in this country. Have for a long time, but most doctors shy away from here. Not that I can blame them much. Van Scoy pulled out just when he was needed—and got himself cordially hated for doing it, but maybe he was setting a precedent of some sort."

There was an implied threat in that. Lance made no move, no reply. Randall went on levelly.

"Since you're here, you'd ought to be able to do well —if you use a little common sense. But that's what it takes. Dead men can't heal others."

"In other words, do or die, eh ?"

"Reckon it sizes up to about that. Like I say, I didn't approve much of the way Ape handled things. On the other hand, he's taking my pay—and when a job's started, I always aim to see it through."

"They tell me you pretty well run this country."

"They're not throwin' much too wide a loop, at that."

There was no bragging in that statement. Just a calm acceptance of fact.

"And if you get MacVeigh out of the way, you *will* run it ?"

"That's the size of it. Only, so far as he's concerned, I'll run it anyway. He ain't that important, any more."

"Hardly worth a thousand dollars, then ?" Lance challenged.

Randall's eyes narrowed.

"He's worth that to me right now. When I start in for a showdown, on any proposition, I don't like to waste time."

His gaze was a challenge. Lance shoved the money back, and stood up.

"I've listend to your proposition, Randall. Now I'm giving you one minute to get the hell out of here."

Randall looked surprised, a little amused. Slowly he got to his feet, opened his pocket-book and methodically stuffed the bills back, shoved it deep in his pocket. His glance met the doctor's fairly.

"Damned if I wouldn't like you, given a chance, Doc," he said, and there was real regret in his tone. "And we did need a good medico here. As it is, I'll hate like blazes to see a good man wasted."

Nodding, he turned, and the clump of his boots on the stairs had a curiously final sound.

CHAPTER V

RANDALL'S DAUGHTER

LANCE was finishing setting the room to rights when there was a rush of flying feet on the stairs again, light and quick. He turned, expecting to see Mavis, but found instead a slender girl with deep red-gold hair and eyes like the blue of sky at evening, who was regarding him breathlessly from the shelter of the doorway.

For an instant she met his gaze, then looked around the room as though seeking some sort of an answer there. The barrenness of it apparently was not reassuring. She came on in, closed the door behind her.

"I'm Linda Randall," she said. "I saw Dad come away from here a few minutes ago."

Lance pushed forward a chair.

"Is there anything that I can do for you, Miss Randall?" he asked.

"How—how is Mr. MacVeigh?" She was a little breathless with her eagerness.

"He's alive. Not much more than that, right now."

She looked at him a moment, and if he had ever seen tragedy in a face, Lance knew that he saw it now. Suddenly she burst out.

"Oh, I can guess what Dad came here for. And, oh, you mustn't do it—you mustn't let him scare you out, or buy you out. I—I hope you didn't take his money?"

"He offered me a thousand dollars."

"To let Mr. MacVeigh die?"

"Yes."

A look of hopelessness was on her face for a moment.

"It's a—a lot of money."

"Yes," Lance agreed. "It's a lot of money."

"I haven't much of my own. But I'd do it." She was looking at him imploringly.

"Are you doing this for MacVeigh?"

Linda shook her head.

"No. I've no use for him. But Dad—he must seem terrible to you, coming here and making such an offer But in a lot of ways he's fine. I don't want him to be a murderer."

She hesitated a moment, then, as there was no change in his expression, she crossed the room to him, placed her hands on his shoulders, looked into his eyes as though she would compel him by the very force of her own feeling.

"You—you don't look like a man—who would do such a thing. Who would sell another man's life."

"I hope I'm not."

She was suddenly breathless again, eagerness flaming in her eyes like a banner.

"You—you mean, you didn't do it?"

"What do you think?"

She studied him a moment longer, and her face was almost tragic.

"Forgive me for misjudging you. We—we need men like you—in this country. Only——" Her hands made a little hopeless gesture. "I'm afraid. Dad is so hard,

so relentless, these last few months.''

Lance's mind went back to what Mavis MacVeigh had told him, about Sam Randall's death or disappearance, months before. There were a lot of factors involved here.

"Thanks for your interest,'' he said. "I'll try and watch my step.''

Linda was a creature of swiftly changing moods. Again her face was radiant.

"It's I who should thank you,'' she exclaimed. "And —I'm going to.''

Before he quite understood her purpose, she had risen on tiptoe, hands still on his shoulders, her lips brushed his own like dew falling on a rose petal. Then, flushing scarlet, light as a bird, she was across to the door, turning there.

"You can't know how much it means to me,'' she said. "But I won't forget.''

He heard her steps on the stairs outside, and crossed to a window on the street in time to see her untie a horse from a hitching rail, swing easily into the saddle, then turn down the street, riding with unconscious grace.

Mavis returned presently. Reese MacVeigh was still unconscious. His usually tanned and ruddy face had a washed-out look now, since he had lost a lot of blood. A few minutes more, without attention, and Ape Narcross would have rid the range of Dave Randall's biggest enemy.

Or would he ? What malignant force still rode this windswept range, twisting the destiny of men to strange ends ? More and more it seemed to Lance that he, and all these others, were puppets caught in the grip of something intangible but terrible. The curse of a dead man—the thing seemed ridiculous, but common sense could not alter facts.

Evening was settling over Windspur. Dusk was beginning to cloak the harsh outlines of the surrounding country, these sharply etched, treeless hills, making them almost pleasant for a brief moment, like a fleeting dream.

The doctor went downstairs, on to the street, selected a restaurant and went in. He had almost forgotten about eating for a while, but he was sharply hungry now.

He was aware of the furtive, almost strained looks cast at him; how men shrank away as he came. Two or three nodded briefly. They knew him, knew that he had taken MacVeigh in, that Dave Randall had called on him later. Just now his status was an unknown quantity, but everyone feared to be friendly with him.

Even the next day brought no change in his patient. That did not worry the doctor, for he had expected nothing else. Nature was making its own fight, far more effectively than he could do. Right now there was nothing to do but wait.

Shortly after noon there came the sound of boots and jingle of spurs on the stairway. Two men stood there, dusty from hard riding, as he opened the door. The door across the hall, leading to MacVeigh's room, was closed.

"Yuh the new doc?" one of the cowboys inquired. "There's a right sick man out in the country. Will yuh come and take a look at him?"

"How far is it?"

"'Bout a dozen miles." He jerked a thumb. "We got an extra horse for yuh."

"I'll be ready in a minute," Lance agreed.

"We'll wait downstairs."

They turned, clumped back down and out of sight. The door across the hall opened, Mavis's anxious face looked at him.

"What was it?" she asked.

"Somebody wants a doctor, out in the country."

"You're going?"

"Of course," he agreed.

"But it—it may be a trick—just to get you away from here."

"It may be," Lance agreed equably. "But a doctor doesn't stop to ask such questions. When a call comes,

it's his business to go."

"I—I suppose it is. But if they shouldn't let you come back—and Dad gets worse——"

"I'll be back, all right," Lance promised, and at something in his voice, the jut of his jaw, she was reassured. Somehow, there was competence to this new medico. Two minutes later he was in the saddle, heading out of town with the pair.

He studied them closely, without appearing to do so. One of them was tall, unusually slender, but with rippling muscles like the sleek grace of a puma. His hair was almost the same tawny yellow, his smile open and friendly but an eternal vigilance dwelt in the depths of his eyes. Now he jerked a thumb with a disarming grin.

"Reckon I've been sort of neglectful Doc. Me, I'm Slim Lonegran—tall an' handsome, uh course. This here homely sidekick of mine, who's a load for any two horses but ain't never mastered the art of stayin' on more'm one poor critter at a time, and hardly that, he's Dave Bush. Dave, he shows good sense by trailin' around with me. Makes me a'most hopeful he might amount to something yet."

"I might of, if I hadn't made that mistake," Dave returned dryly.

Out of town now, the beating sunshine, garish on the hills, merely served to accentuate the bleakness of the country through which they rode. If anything, it was less prepossessing than it had been when coming on the stage. Off in the distance was what looked to be badlands—rocky, broken, river valleys sunk below the level of the surrounding land, for there were no hills worthy of the name.

Presently it began to change. Here was some of the land of which he had heard, like an oasis in the desert. The hills were wooded in spots, making them seem almost like real hills. A deep, turbulent creek cut its way along below them, the grass was good.

This was cattle country, and it was no surprise to

Lance when they came finally to a big ranch, with a big house, barns and corrals and a look of undoubted prosperity. It hardly required the brand painted on the barn in ten-foot size to tell Lance that this was Dave Randall's Neckyoke.

Most of the crew were lounging about now, just in from work. With them was Ape Narcross, and, sitting wrapped in a blanket, grave and unmoving, was an Indian. Not far off, a half-grown bear played about a tree from which most of the bark had long since been worn, a collar and chain about his neck.

Randall himself appeared, nodding jovially as Lance dismounted.

"Good afternoon, Doc," he greeted. "Glad to see you here. Mighty glad to see you."

"I suppose you haven't any sick man?" Lance asked.

"Well, that's all in the way you look at it, I expect. Maybe some of us are a lot sicker than we look—or know about. Might all be down sick before we know it. Nothing like having a medico to see to things, when there's one handy."

Lance shrugged.

"Maybe you're right," he agreed.

"Supper's just about ready," Randall went on. "Come on in and have a bite with us. No hurry about other things."

Lance accepted. Most of the crew were looking at him furiously, but like Slim and Dave, they were not unfriendly. Ape Narcross was sullen, and he didn't bother to speak. Which was all right with Lance, if he felt that way about it.

Lone Eagle Feather had come in with the rest of them, was seated at the opposite end of the table, stowing away the food in silence. Randall, beside Lance, grinned.

"He belongs to a small bunch of tribesmen off here a ways," he explained. "They're the remnants of a once great band that used to range across this whole country. Skilled artisans in their day, as I understand

it, but that day is long past. Now a few of them weave a few baskets, hunt a little and subsist on the bounty of the government, and they're even too superstitious of the spirits to go near the places where their people used to live. Lone Eagle Feather, he comes over here about once a month to get a good feed. Always says he's sick as an excuse—but it don't seem to affect his appetite."

"Sick this time, is he?" Lance asked.

"Claims to be. He'll feel better by the time the grub's all gone."

That seemed to be true. The meal over—and for him it had been a prodigious one—Lone Eagle Feather gathered his blanket about him like a regal robe of state and stalked across to where his pony stood with drooping head. Mounting, he rode gravely over the rise and out of sight.

"Where did you say he lived?" Lance asked.

"Off there about a dozen miles." Randall jerked a thumb. "There are maybe plenty of them, though he's the only one who ever comes visiting. Kind of a friendly old chap. You'll spend the night with us, of course?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to be getting back to town, Randall."

The cattleman shook his head.

"I'm going soft," he complained. "I used to be more direct, and to the devil with it. But Linda has that effect on me. We really need you right here for a few days, Doc—and that being so, we can't let you go for a spell. Happens to be a matter of life and death." He grinned mirthlessly. "You'll be well paid for the time you spend here. We sure aim to look after the good health of our crew here."

"I wonder."

Randall's eyes narrowed.

"It happens to be true. By the way—it almost seems as if I'd seen you somewhere, before. What did you say your name was?"

"Prescott."

"Prescott?" Randall's eyes were slitted. "I——"

There was sudden stir as a rider came galloping up, his horse lathered.

"Fire!" he yelled. "The north range is all blazing."

CHAPTER VI

FROSTY, THE OUTLAW CAYUSE.

DAVE RANDALL'S half-bantering air dropped from him like a discarded gun-shell. Fire could be a serious matter on the range, Lance knew, and it was plain that they regarded it so. Randall swung on the messenger.

"Fire?" he rasped. "Now how'd a blaze get started off there?"

He didn't stop for an answer, but suspicion was in his eyes, and reflected on the faces of the crew already running for horses. Randall barked orders, and within two minutes the corral was all but empty, saddled horses and riders were heading to the north. Even the cook had been recruited. But in all the excitement, Randall was taking no chances.

"Sorry to have to keep you here, Doc," he said. "But it's the best way out for all of us. Besides, I want to have a talk with you. Slim will stay with you—and Slim means business. Be seeing you."

Randall rode with the rest of them. Slim watched them out of sight, shook his head and sighed.

"Now ain't that heck, Doc?" he demanded. "Here I'm picked to stay and entertain you, just because I've got such a charming personality. Somebody dumb like Dave can go and get in on all the excitement. Some-

times I almost wisht I wasn't so gifted. But I suppose we might as well go in and take it easy.''

Knowing what lay behind the suggestion, Lance agreed. Slim's job was to keep him from straying, and if it came to trouble, Slim looked capable of giving plenty of it himself.

'' The way it looks tuh me,'' Slim said, sprawling in an easy chair, ''and here I'm going and shootin' off my mouth, givin' advice without being asked—which is a plumb fool thing to do—but the way it looks tuh me, Doc, is that yuh're a lot like me—too big a fool for your own good.''

Lance grinned back at him. He liked Slim.

'' Yeah ? '' he asked.

'' Yeah. Dismissin' them frivolous remarks I just made, it'd be the hee-roic thing for me to insist on going along and fightin' that fire, while somebody else stayed to keep yuh comp'ny. But me, I don't feel called on tuh do nothin' thataway. If the boss pays me for entertainin' you, why—that suits me right down to the ground. It's an easy, pleasant job.''

'' You think I'd ought to take his pay and do as he says then ? '' Lance asked.

'' Why not ? It'll all come out the same way in the end. Yuh can't buck the boss. Only diff'rence is, if you buck him, maybe you won't come out so good yoreself.''

'' Well, maybe you're right,'' Lance conceded. ''He seems to be pretty strong in this country.''

'' He ain't just strong,'' Slim assured him earnestly. ''A polecat's that. But Randall, he's the whole country.''

''Well, he said he wanted to have another talk with me when he got back,'' Lance yawned. ''Er—your job of keeping me company doesn't keep us from having a bit of refreshment, does it ? Or don't you have any such ? ''

Slim grinned.

'' Am I as dry as that, Doc ? But it ain't a bad idea,

at that. Come along with me and I reckon mebby I can find a bottle that ain't done its duty yet."

He led the way to the kitchen, opened a cupboard, took down a couple of glasses and a brown bottle.

"How do yuh like it, Doc ?" he asked. "Me, I ain't like some of the boys, tryin' tuh drink this rattlesnake poison straight. I like a little water sort of mixed in. Seems to improve the water."

"Suits me better that way, too," Lance agreed. He took the glasses, poured water from a dipper and tin pail in the corner, into each one, and Slim added the whisky.

"Here's mud in yore eye !" Slim grinned at him, and they raised their glasses together.

It had been astonishingly simple. Slim Lonegran might be a right good cow waddy, and a tough hombre when it came to trouble, but he was simple-minded and trusting. Lance had slipped a little powder into his glass along with the water, and ten minutes later, sprawled in a chair in front of the range, with the tea-kettle singing sleepily, Slim was snoring blissfully.

With only a glance at him, Lance went outside. Dusk was settling now, there was a sharp bite to the air which foretold the coming of winter, and the stars had a pale cast to them. There was no moon visible. Off in the distance was a red glare, showing that the prairie fire still raged, though the width of it seemed to be diminishing. It would keep them busy for another hour, however, which should be ample for his purpose.

The whole crew had been suspicious that someone had deliberately set that fire—which, on a cattle range, with winter in the offing, came close to being the unpardonable sin. Who could have done it ? That their thoughts had centred darkly around the Broken Chain was plain.

The corrals were all but empty. One horse paced in solitary grandeur, neck arched proud, pawing the ground with impatient hoof and snorting as though scenting the battle afar. He was a big roan, weighing close to two

hundred pounds more than the average cow pony, but long in the barrel, built for speed and stamina.

"There's a horse," Lance nodded. He explored the barn, found it empty as well. Only the bear cub was still active, over by its tree, whining a little, fretful at the confinement.

Every other cayuse, it seemed, had been taken to the fire. Lance lifted down a lariat, buckled on spurs, took bridle, saddle and blanket, and carried them outside.

"Looks like you were it, old fellow," he nodded. But an attempt to walk up to the big roan with bridle in his hand met with swift and unfavourable response.

"Figured you might be touchy," Lance nodded equably. He took up the rope, swung it expertly. The cayuse tried to dodge, with equal expertness, but the loop settled around his neck. He plunged a time or so, but by then Lance had a half-hitch around one of the posts. Recognizing the futility of struggle against the choking noose, the horse waited, feet braced, eyes rolling.

Lance walked up to him, forced the bit between stubborn teeth, took off the rope. That, he realized instantly, was a mistake. Already it was apparent enough why such a splendid specimen of horseflesh had been left in the corral while lesser animals were taken. This big roan was an outlaw, and nobody had cared to monkey with him when haste was required.

The choking rope free of his neck, he lunged viciously, long neck outstretched, ears laid back, lips drawn back from ugly teeth. Lance leaped aside, stumbled, and barely saved himself as the roan, whirling, lashed out with both hind feet in as treacherous a kick as he had ever seen.

A few quick steps carried Lance to the side of the corral, and with no time to spare, the outlaw thundering in pursuit. This was more than an outlaw. He was a killer cayuse.

For a moment, safe on the top rail, Lance sat, regarding him gravely. To ride such a horse meant that he had

a fight on his hands. But it was either that or be recaptured soon, for on foot he would stand little chance of getting back to town. He took up the rope again, threw.

This time, with the noose about his neck, the roan was a fighting, plunging fury. For the next five minutes, Lance worked swiftly, expertly. It was no easy job, single-handed, to throw such a cayuse, stretch him out and lash the saddle in place. It required an extra rope about those flailing hind feet, and the outlaw was half-choked before he submitted.

He stood up, quietly enough, when the ropes were thrown off, stood trembling and uneasy as Lance vaulted into the saddle. And then he went into action which made what had gone before seem tame.

Not many people knew that Lance Prescott had been raised on a cattle ranch ; but anyone seeing him in the next few minutes would have admitted that he knew how to ride. In a gallery before spectators, such a ride would have won top honours at a rodeo. To-night there was no one to see, but something more than top honours depended on his staying in the saddle.

Bucking, sunfishing, whirling, rising on hind legs, trying to fall on its rider, plunging at the fence in an effort to brush him off, Lance discovered that staying in the saddle was more than half of it. For this outlaw cayuse was certainly a killer. To be pitched headlong to the ground now would mean being trampled under vicious hoofs before he could ever regain his feet.

It seemed an interminable time before the roan showed signs of tiring. Lance felt as though his spine had been cracked like a whip, but he was still in the saddle. As the big brute hesitated, he spurred suddenly and hard, and the next instant they were out of the corral and thundering down the road in a cloud of dust.

A little over an hour later, Lance pulled up at the livery stable in Windspur. Seldom had he ever travelled at such speed on a horse, even for a short distance, and the big roan had maintained the pace almost unbroken all

the way to town. Yet now, as Lance dismounted, he was scarcely blowing or sweating. Lance viewed him admiringly.

" Take this horse and give him a good rub down," he instructed. I don't think you'll have any trouble with him. Keep him here. Dave Randall will call for him in a day or so, I expect."

The attendant stared from the horse to Lance and back again, open mouthed.

" Yuh—yuh mean to say you rode him in here ? " he demanded.

" You saw me, didn't you ? "

The attendant shook his tow head unbelievingly.

" Yeh, I saw yuh," he agreed. " But then, I don't always believe everything I see. Why hell, Doc," he exploded. " Do yuh know what hawss that is ? "

" Fastest horse I ever rode."

"Yeh, I reckon. That's Frosty—worst outlaw cayuse that ever hit these parts. And yuh rode him ! Doc, yuh must be considerable of a man. There ain't nary hombre, even Dave Randall or his son, ever topped that bronk before."

He led the now docile Frosty away, still muttering to himself. More sore from the shaking-up he had taken than he cared to confess, Lance climbed the stairs, pushed open the door to where Reese MacVeigh lay.

Something hard and round hit him in the stomach as he opened the door, a voice drawled carelessly.

"Been waitin' for yuh, Doc. Better reach for the ceilin'—lead pills ain't right pleasant tuh take, though they sure can make a complete cure for what ails yuh."

CHAPTER VII

LINDA RANDALL DISAPPEARS

A COAL oil-lamp burned on a stand in one corner of the room, giving light enough to see the gun which was thrust unpleasantly into his stomach. The bed looked undisturbed, with Reese MacVeigh on it. Standing beside the bed, her face as white as the sheets, was Mavis, and behind her, a gun in his hand as well, was a second cowboy, with a two-storied totally bald head.

Near the bed lay a door, evidently intended for use as a stretcher. That this was to be a case of kidnapping the patient seemed evident. Lance raised his hands in obedience to the gouging gun, felt it shift and waver, and an instant later his knee caught the other man in the groin.

As the gun dropped from a suddenly lax hand, Lance caught it expertly in the air, twisting it around. The recent holder was doubled up in agony, helpless for the moment. Before the man behind Mavis quite knew what was happening, Lance had him covered.

Caught offguard, it would have been folly to try and bring his own gun up, and the look in the doctor's steely eyes convinced him of it. For an instant he stared with sagging jaw, bald pate gleaming dully under the light. Then he relaxed a little with a sigh like a tired horse about to roll, his fingers opened and his gun clattered on the floor.

"Looks like we was in sort uh fast company, Doc," he conceded. "What yuh done tuh Turkey, there?"

"Knocked the wind out of him," Lance nodded. "He'll be all right. And now, if the two of you have stayed long enough—just take your door and get going. We don't really need it here, and we can spare you, too."

The man called Turkey, with an abnormally long neck

and over-large and over-reddish nose, was grinning wryly.

"Doc," he said admiringly, "Baldy ain't said the half of it. Fast ain't no word for you. Yuh're as unexpected as findin' a wasp in yore pocket."

They picked up the door, marched out and down. Lance pocketed the gun, turned to Mavis.

"Have they done any damage around here?" he asked. "They haven't bothered you?"

"No, they had just come," she explained. Her eyes were shining as she viewed him. "You're a lot more than just a doctor, when it comes to that, aren't you?"

Lance picked the other gun up, studied it thoughtfully.

"I almost begin to believe that I'm not quite all washed up yet," he conceded with a rare smile. "I suppose they were from the Neckyoke?"

"Yes. They were in town for the evening, and I think it was their own idea—after about three or four drinks—to come here and kidnap father. From what they said, I don't believe that Mr. Randall had anything to do with it."

Lance examined his patient for a moment, finding him still in the coma, from which even the excitement had failed to rouse him. That, however, was nothing to worry about, at this stage. He nodded reassuringly to Mavis.

"He's doing as well as can be expected. And now you'd better try and get some sleep. I'll see that you aren't disturbed again to-night."

He returned to his own rooms, but there he lay long awake, his mind on the events of the day. That Indian, what was his name—Lone Eagle Feather, who had claimed to be sick. He looked sick, too, to the doctor's experienced eyes. The way things were shaping up, it looked like a lot of trouble was in store for this range, in the next few weeks.

Reese MacVeigh was better the next morning. He was not only conscious, but hungry. An iron constitution

was beginning to have its way, and it looked as though he would overcome the effects of that bullet which he had stopped.

"And when I get well," he growled, "there's going to be war on this range. I've tried to keep the peace, for I'm a peaceful man. But when a killer like Ape Narcross shoots you down in the street—well, next time he'd better shoot a little straighter."

Lance couldn't blame him for feeling as he did. The morning was a busy one for him. There had been a shooting in one of the saloons, just as the day was getting started, and that meant two more patients. Another man, as though deciding to take advantage of a medico being in the country, had tumbled off a horse and broken a leg. Lance smiled grimly to himself as he worked. Here, a few days ago, he had figured he was all washed up and through as a doctor—and from the looks of things he'd soon be having more work than ever.

It was mid-forenoon when he had another visitor. Linda Randall came in, flushed and a little breathless, her eyes glowing.

"I've just heard about what you did last night—how you rode Frosty, and—and how you beat Turkey and Baldy after they had the drop on you," she said. "I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate it—though it does seem rather terrible, as though I were disloyal to Dad—but I think you understand."

Again, for the second time in as many days, that unused smile of Lance's showed itself, as he looked into her eyes, so like the evening sky at sunset, taking her outstretched hands in his own for a moment.

"I understand," he agreed. "And even if your father doesn't right now, I'm sure he will come to, sooner or later."

"Oh, I—I hope so," she agreed. "I pray so, every day. Yesterday he sent me to visit a friend for a few days—I didn't think why, then. How—how is Mr. MacVeigh now?"

"He's improving a good deal."

"I'm glad." She hesitated a moment, turning towards the stairway, drawing on her gloves. "Well, good-bye Doctor." She smiled tremulously at him, was gone.

Lance remained staring after her for a minute. She had wanted to say something else, but had not. Something was troubling her, more than just her father's attitude and these attempts on the life of Reese MacVeigh. He crossed to the street window, to see her in the saddle, a rather lonely, pathetically gallant little figure, riding slowly down the street.

Windspur was particularly desolate to-day. A grey haze of clouds shut away the sun, and everything was cheerless, with a raw wind whipping in fitful gusts. The town seemed to crouch low against the bleak earth like a shivering hound against the unfriendly elements.

The door opened again, and Dave Randall stood there. To Lance's surprise, he was grinning broadly. He strode into the office, paused to close the door carefully behind him, then collapsed into a chair, broad shoulders heaving with silent laughter. Presently he raised his head to stare at Lance and to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Damn it, Doc, you're worse than a buzzin' mosquito when a man's trying to sleep," he exploded. "But I haven't had as good a laugh in months—even if it is on me. Here we go off to put that fire out, leaving you with Slim Lonegran, who's supposed to be about as tough a hombre as they run. And we come back to find Slim snorin' at forty miles an hour, and you gone—and Frosty with you."

"I hope the fire didn't do too much damage ?" Lance commented.

"No we got it out all right—though I'd like to get my hands on whoever set it. The range is getting pretty dry, but we'll be having snow any day now. And I get to town here and they tell me that you rode that Frosty horse in, tame as a kitten. Looks like you're quite a

man, Doc."

"Frosty is quite a horse."

"Like him, do you?"

"Who wouldn't?"

Randall grinned.

"Well, I could name you quite a few so-called horsemen who have tried to ride that roan, and from the remarks they've made, after they picked themselves up—they didn't just appear to like him. I was keeping him for the rodeos, figuring he wasn't good for anything else, but you've spoiled him for that. So you might as well keep him. You're the only man can ride him. He's your horse."

Lance stared at the cattleman a moment, hiding his surprise behind a blank face. He nodded.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Reckon you have it coming. How's MacVeigh this morning?"

"Improving."

"Well, with you to look after him, I don't wonder. By the way, you said your name is Prescott. Maybe that's why you looked kind of familiar to me the other day. Any relation to Gunning Prescott?"

"My father."

"I guessed as much. You're a lot like him—stubborn as a mule. Ornery a cuss as I ever did know. Best friend I ever had—and worst enemy. And so you come back to the old range where all the trouble started."

"I seem to have drifted here, for a fact." Lance crossed to the window, stared out, came back. "You know, it looks to me like a lot of foolishness, misunderstanding, somewhere. There used to be four of you—good friends. Then all four enemies. Dad is dead these many years. So is Danny Darrel. But you and MacVeigh are still alive, neighbours. You should be friends."

Randall's face darkened.

"No chance of that."

"Why not? Or does the curse of Danny Darrel drive you as it does the rest of us?"

"What the devil do you know about the curse?"

"Plenty. Darrel cursed you—and Reese MacVeigh—and my dad. He said his curse would follow all three, until they were all dead and every member of their families—that trouble and death would hound them while they lived, death and disgrace afterwards. Well—look at the record. You've been prosperous, and what has it brought you? Your son disappears——"

"Murdered!" Randall growled.

"Maybe. But what about it? Isn't that the way it works? Your daughter is bitterly unhappy——"

"What gives you that idea?"

"Why argue? She doesn't want to see her father a murderer. But that's where it's heading."

Randall stood up, sank down again, the veins of forehead and neck standing out.

"That's where it'll keep on heading as long as Sam's killers run this ɹange like wolves," he said thickly.

Lance shrugged.

"Have it your own way. I'm warning you of one thing—you're looking for trouble, and there's going to be a lot more of it on this range, this winter, than anybody's counting on."

"The Ghost of Danny Darrel will stalk, I suppose?" Randall sneered. "Who are you to talk?"

"Maybe it sounds funny to you, but it's the curse that drove me back here. You don't believe in it, and it does no good to warn you."

Randall arose, crossed to the door. There he turned.

"Maybe I do," he said. "Maybe not. Who your father was makes no difference to me. I pay my bills, Doc, as they come. Which doesn't change things any."

He was back, two days later, with no sign of laughter this time. Rather, his face looked haggard and old.

"Doc, you couldn't by any chance tell me where to find my daughter, could you?" he asked, without preamble.

"Why, no," Lance agreed, and felt as though some of the chill from the outer street had penetrated to the room. "Let's see, she was here a couple of days ago, a little while before you called. I haven't seen her since."

"Nor have I. Looks like you were the last man that did talk to her—and then you talked to me of a lot of trouble coming to this range, this winter. You'd better explain."

"That's easy enough to do. Any one but a blind man could see where this break between you and MacVeigh is heading for, at a hard gallop. That's what I had in mind— bearing in mind also the curse of Danny Darrel——"

"There you go again," Randall exclaimed angrily. "I'd think a man of your intelligence would be above such rot."

"I'd think so, too—if I hadn't felt it," Lance agreed "I'm trying to get to the bottom of it—to find what the curse is. But what about Linda? I give you my word that I know nothing of it. She simply rode up the street and out of town."

"And off the earth, from the looks of things." The haggard glare was back in the cattleman's eyes. His voice softened.

"I know she doesn't approve of—of some of my policies. Women usually don't understand such things. But she likes me—and I can't understand her not coming home. I had supposed she had gone to visit a girl friend—but there's no trace of her anywhere. Not a trace, I tell you. I'm —damn it, I'm worried, Prescott. I was wondering if she had said anything to you at all, of her intentions——"

Lance shook his head, slowly. Remembering that hesitation of Linda's before she had finally gone, without speaking what was in her mind, how slowly she had ridden away down the street, out into the bleakness of that grey desolate day. And so, apparently, to oblivion.

CHAPTER VIII

REESE MACVEIGH GOES HOME

By the next day, the disappearance of Linda Randall was common knowledge, and Windspur, almost to a man, was openly worried ; search parties were in progress —small groups of men who rode the desolate country and returned with set faces and shaking heads.

It was more than a half a year ago that Sam Randall had vanished in the same mysterious manner—murdered, in the belief of Dave Randall, by Reese MacVeigh or at his orders. And from that had flowered the murderous bitterness, long in process of ugly growth, which now gripped the land like the clutching talons of a buzzard.

But even Dave Randall was not one to suggest that MacVeigh could have anything to do with this. It was a matter of common knowledge that Randall's daughter had not seen eye to eye with her father in the course events were taking, that in this latest clash she had sympathized with the MacVeighs. And the open concern expressed by Reese MacVeigh, on hearing the news, was proof enough for Lance that he could have had no knowledge of such a thing.

"She's been like my own daughter, almost," he said, shaking his head. "She and Mavis have been the best of friends. Man, there's something dev'lish about this whole range, o' late—something that fair gives you the creeps. 'Tis more than bloody murder stalkin'. 'Tis as though the devil was set loose hereabouts for special evil."

Reese MacVeigh had made rapid improvement in those few days. As he himself expressed it, he would soon be a man again. A mere gunshot could not long keep him down.

Lance himself had ridden out on the hunt. He was

inclined more and more to agree with MacVeigh about the devil—or some particular devil, such as the ghost of Danny Darrel. Ranch-raised himself, he knew this country and the men who lived in it—men with hot tempers, swift passions and as swift to action. Men who hated fiercely and loved passionately. But with few exceptions, they confined their war among themselves. A woman was safe here—far safer by comparison than in the more civilized east.

There were exceptions, of course—such men as Ape Narcross. But Ape was in Dave Randall's employ. Of course, Linda might have ridden somewhere of her own accord, and probably had. But she might have met with some accident, out on the desolate reaches of this land that it seemed had been forgotten——

For the moment, Lance had his hands full with other things. After three grey, bleak days, the sun shone again, the air was warm. It was a day almost too good to be true, in such a setting, and others seemed to feel the same.

"It won't last," Reese MacVeigh predicted. "A day or so and likely we'll have a howlin' blizzard—'tis the season for such, and one day will not convince me otherwise. And when winter hits on this range, man—it hits hard. It fair gripes with a stranglehold. And 'tis for that I'm asking ye to get me back to my own ranch this day, before winter sets in. I can no' be contented here in town."

Lance had agreed. MacVeigh could probably stand the trip without ill effects. And he might be a lot better off in his own home than here in town, especially if winter did close down.

The trip, of course, would have to be made in a lumber wagon. With plenty of straw in the bottom, and MacVeigh made comfortable in blankets, he should make the trip without much discomfort. To make sure that he was not jolted unduly, Lance intended to drive the team himself.

The journey was scheduled for that afternoon, and Mavis had already ridden on home to have things in readiness. The day was almost perfect. The sun, at noon, was warm and bright, without a cloud in the sky or breath of wind. It was really warm, pleasant. Just such a day, Lance reflected grimly, as the weather could use for a complete turn-about-face within an hour. Better to get MacVeigh home while it held this way.

Once there, if nothing untoward occurred on the trip, he would be safe, and well on the road to recovery. Under the doctor's eye he was carried down on a stretcher, insisting that he should be allowed to walk, tucked comfortably in the wagon, and Lance gathered up the reins, drove out of town.

It was fifteen miles to the Broken Chain, and would take a good part of the afternoon for the trip. All forenoon, Lance had been away on business of his own—business, he reflected which would cause eyes to pop and tongues to wag in consternation if they knew what it was about. And the grim part of it was that the whole community must soon learn.

Well, he had done what he could—all that he could, for the matter of that. Days ago, he had sent out urgently for a stock of medicines and supplies, and they should arrive by stage any day now. If he had had those same supplies to start with, he might have accomplished more in the interim. Since he could do so little without them, it was better, as yet, that no one knew what hideous thing crouched behind the low line of mountains and stared down on Windspur with red eyes in a face of death. Panic would only make matters worse.

To his surprise, Mavis met them at the edge of town, galloping up in a cloud of dust which hung behind her in a long wreath, pulling up expertly beside the wagon to smile down on her father.

"Everything is going nicely," she said. "In fact, if I were asked to, I might take a few minutes off before hurrying on back, to ride in the wagon and talk to a

couple of gentlemen.''

"It doesn't need two such hints to get you the invitation,'' Lance declared, and swept off his hat. "Miss MacVeigh, nothing would give us greater pleasure, or do our patient more good, I am sure, than if you would ride with us a while.''

Laughing, she tied her horse behind the wagon, climbed expertly over the wheel and on to the seat before Lance could aid her. She was in high spirits to-day, with her father well on the road to recovery and homeward bound. The cloud of trouble that always seemed to lurk far back in her eyes was very faint to-day.

"I'm always glad to get away from Windspur,'' she confided. "It's so much like the whole of Desolate Range—but the Broken Chain is a paradise, after the rest of this range. What I can't understand is how such a fine doctor as you would pull up stakes and come to a place like Windspur—though we did need a doctor desperately, and I'll never cease to be grateful to you for coming when you did—and doing what you have done.''

"I'm glad I was able to come at the right time, anyway,'' Lance said, and changed the subject. That was dangerous ground. Mavis was the one person, so far as he knew, who knew his background, knew where he was from.

To indulge in superstitions, he was convinced, was foolish. If a man like Dave Randall was above them, so should he be. A curse? It was all foolishness, after all, just because there had been bad luck. Look how MacVeigh and Randall alike had prospered.

He wanted to forget the old life, with its creeping shadows, the blasting thing that had driven him forth like a hunted creature. Certainly, the last place that he had looked for a chance to start over again, was here on Desolate Range—but it was a challenging place, and he was beginning to like it, to find something of the raw primitive strength of it for his own.

"Well, I'll be getting back to the ranch again,''

Mavis said presently. "Just to make sure that things are coming right there. You seem to have them well under control here, Doctor."

She was away in a new cloud of dust, a straight, gallant figure in the saddle, turning to wave briefly before she rounded a turn and was out of sight. Since the road was smooth here, Lance kept the horses at a trot. They were a matched team of bays from the Broken Chain, chosen because of their steadiness.

Down below, now, was a creek—the Big Muddy, it was called, though to-day it was sparkling clear, with occasional deep pools that looked as though they might be full of trout. Here was a winding road, with the low hills rising up on one side, the creek down below, often an almost sheer drop down to it—ranging from ten to a hundred feet as the road went up or down for every intervening hill and gully.

The Big Muddy, here, was a good-sized stream, such as would have been called a river a few hundred miles farther to the east. Reese MacVeigh cocked an ear as the wagon rumbled along, gazing at the landscape about him.

"About six miles more," he said contentedly. "I know every foot of ground along this road—in fact, I've been layin' here with my eyes closed, and I can tell most of it just from the sound of the wheels or the echoes as we cross a coulee, or the water runnin' down below."

"You've been in this country quite a while now?"

"Thirty years," MacVeigh nodded. "I was just a wanderin' cowpuncher when I rode across this range. Four of us—and all good friends, till the day we quarrelled with Danny Darrel.

"It was just a little joke, or so we intended it. We'd caught a cub bear, the three of us—Dave Randall, Gunning Prescott—he had the same name as yourself, Doc man—and me. And we tied it where Danny would ride on to it in the dusk, thinkin' to have a good laugh at his expense. But never did a joke so misfire as that one." He laughed ruefully.

"He came along as we'd figured, and his horse wheeled and started to run, and slipped and fell—and horse and man went off a bank and down maybe twenty feet. We got to Danny, pretty scared, and picked him up, all limp and bloody, and started to carry him back to the cabin. His horse, the crazy cayuse, had jumped up and run off, not hurt any. We were badly frightened, I tell you."

"I don't wonder at that."

"It was a shocking end to what we'd planned as a mild joke. But it wan't the end. Only the beginning. As we passed the cub bear, Danny opened his eyes and looked at it, and he saw the chain, and I think he understood, right then. For the look in his eyes wasn't pleasant—not at all like the Danny we'd known.

"For two days and nights he never spoke a word. Then he got up, despite anything we could say, and said we'd tried to murder him—and that it was something we should all rue to the last day of our lives. He pronounced a black curse on us, all three—of enmity, death, destruction for ourselves and all our families—I'll never forget the way he looked. It made me shiver at the time, and even yet, when I think of it, the sun seems cold."

That was no illusion. For a moment there had been a cloud across the sun.

"We tried to explain, to argue with him, to stop him. It was no use. The old, happy-go-lucky Danny was gone. He finished with his curse, and walked away from us. And not long after, Dave Randall and I quarrelled with Gunning Prescott. Soon after that, he left this country, but Dave and I stayed on—because we had quarrelled then, too. A funny reason for staying, eh?"

"It might not be."

"It seems so now, when I look back on it. For I'd never aimed to stop any longer than I had to, not on this range. It was too bleak for me. Then I ran into a little valley that looked like paradise set down in the

middle—and nobody had ever taken it, being that the whole country looked so bad. It was so promising that I figured a poor man could get a start in here a lot easier than he could on most ranges.

"Even at that I wouldn't have stayed, only for Dave Randall. He had just found his place, and had about the same idea. He aimed to have my valley as well, and told me so. I was just that stubborn, I told him I'd see him in hell 'fore he'd get that land, and I've stayed there ever since."

There in stark, revealing words, was all the old animosity and the cause of it. The black curse of Danny Darrel. And now that long-festering hate was shaping up to a grimmer war than it had been at any time during those three red decades.

The voice of the Big Muddy was a growl now. Nearly two hundred feet below, it swept along a rocky channel, churned to froth by vicious, upjutting boulders which, like the men, held their place despite constant war and opposition. The bank sloped steeply down to it, a half-sandy, half-clay loam, sun-baked and crumbly, with here and there a patch of grass or a wind-twisted bush clinging desperately to a meagre existence.

The team rounded a sharp curve in the road, and suddenly Lance was bracing himself on the seat, reaching for the socketed whip, while his mind jumped with startled clarity back to that event of thirty years before which had started this long train of events in motion.

Some twenty feet up the hillside above the road, a great stone, as big as a homestead shack, had seemed to balance for more than a quarter of a century, always seeming to be in imminent danger of sliding down into the road.

Through all those years it had sat there, unstirring in storm and calm. But to-day it had slid. Now it blocked the road from rearing bank above to sheer bank below on the other side, save for a yard-wide path at the outer edge. And coming along that path, around the edge of

the boulder, even as the team came in sight, was a half-grown cub bear—heading straight for the team.

The whole thing had happened so suddenly that there was no time for warning. The team, seeing the bear almost under their noses, coupled with the unexpected and fearsome spectre of the big stone squatting in the road, were plunged into swift panic—trying to turn, to whirl end for end and run, there on that narrow ribbon of dug road where even two vehicles could not pass.

CHAPTER IX

THE RED PLAGUE

LANCE'S jaw jutted a little more prominently than usual, as with steady reins and voice he tried to soothe the team, to bring it under control. But already it was too late. Plunging, trying desperately to swing, to turn upon themselves, the rear weels of the wagon were over the edge of the dugroad in the first mad jump, and now the weight of its drag was pulling the team along with it. Hoofs scratching frantically, the horses tried to hold against this new terror, but nothing could stop the plunge.

Even in that crashing second of crisis, the doctor's eyes sweeping the scene before him, recorded certain facts—such as the mark around the bear's neck where a collar had been no longer than hours or even minutes ago. That was the tame cub that he had seen at the Neckyoke on his visit there.

For a moment, lunging into their collars with the strength of desperation, the team managed to hold their ground. There was ample time for a jump, but Lance was too busy for that. Knowing that the wagon was sure

to go, he dropped the reins, swung back over the seat, and grabbed Reese MacVeigh up in his arms, almost in the one motion.

By now the pause was past. Half-sliding, half-falling, but still keeping fairly level, the wagon was sweeping down the slope like a locoed cayuse, dragging the frantic horses with it. Some forty feet down a boulder jutted out and frowned at the river, and with a jarring crash the wagon struck fairly on this,came to a momentary halt.

Braced as he was, Lance was all but thrown off his feet. Boards splintered with the impact, the whole affair rocked crazily, the horses, hanging now in the harness, struggling madly. In another moment something would have to give way. With a tensing of muscles, holding still to MacVeigh, Lance jumped for the bank.

He struck, feet digging in instinctively to the loose, powdery-dry dirt, falling forward on his face and clutching with one hand at a small bush. They were none too soon in quitting the wagon. The boulder had found its hold weathering away through the years, and now it yielded to the impact and wagon, horses and rock were going on down to the boiling waters of the Big Muddy, sparkling in the sunshine.

A crash seemed to shake the hill as they struck, the dying scream of a horse washed away in water flung almost to where Lance clung, while dirt still slid and rumbled loose almost up to his feet, from where the boulder had been torn loose.

Looking down, he saw that one of the horses had broken loose, was swimming away and scrambling out on the far bank, snorting, apparently unhurt. Its mate was lying below the wagon, caught against a boulder, a tangled mass with the rest of the wreckage, unmoving save for the swirling pull of the current.

The whole thing had happened almost too fast for thought, yet MacVeigh and himself had escaped unhurt —up to now. Lance added that with a qualifying grimness as he stared around. The hill, there, was almost a

sheer rise above them, with only an occasional bush or tuft of grass struggling valiantly for a roothold. And though his feet had gouged a hole in the bank as he struck, he could feel it already beginning, slowly, to give way under their weight.

To climb back in that porous, slippery stuff, up such a slope, was out of the question, either singly or together. If they could hold on here until help should happen along the road, they would stand a chance. The small bush to which he clung was already tearing loose, but off a dozen feet was a larger plant, growing sturdily. He had to get hold of that to stand a chance.

So far, he had still clung to Reese MacVeigh, holding him with one arm, the two of them crouched close to the hill, hardly breathing. Now, for the first time, MacVeigh spoke.

"Looks like you'd do better to let go of me, Doc. Danny Darrel's black curse seems to have caught up with me at last, and 'tis no profit in you going along with me. Alone, you'll mebby stand a chance. Together, we'll both end up with more water than we care to drink, mighty soon."

"We'll go up or down together—and I'm figuring it won't be down, just yet a while," Lance assured him. "Hang on to me, and we'll try and get to that bush."

Three or four steps—just that much, but they had to be made fast, with nothing between to hold to. And the handicap of holding a man who outweighed him thirty pounds was far from helping. MacVeigh considered it a moment, nodded.

"You're a stubborn cuss, Prescott like that other Prescott I knew. So go ahead."

It took a moment of desperate scrambling, then, panting and braced, they clung like flies on a wall, little trickles of dirt sliding out from under their feet and rattling down. The river below still frothed angrily.

The sun, beating down, was warm against the hill, but shadows would soon sweep across where they were.

Before that time, however, they would be in the river, failing help. And Lance had no delusions on that subject.

That boulder, which had balanced above the road all these years, had not tumbled of its own accord at that particular moment. The presence of the bear cub was proof enough that the whole thing had been engineered in a deliberate attempt at murder to get them off the road. The way the horses had acted under those circumstances had been almost a certainty, and there was not more than one chance in a hundred that they could take such a plunge and live, even this long. Luck had been with them. But it would have all the look of a perfect accident.

If this was some more of the curse of Danny Darrel, then it was being carried out by vengeful men—men who, perhaps, remembered that other incident with the bear, years before, which had set in motion this whole grim chain of circumstances. Or at least men who had heard of it and seen the possibilities of applying the same trick here.

Which meant, of course, that men from the Neckyoke would be along at any moment now, to see how their scheme had worked out. When they discovered that it was still a little short of success, they would take steps to see that it worked. And to prevent anyone else from offering a helping hand.

So far, he guessed, Reese MacVeigh, aside from thought of Danny Darrel, had no suspicion that it was not a bona-fide accident. He had not seen the bear at all. Nor had he suffered any seriously ill effects as yet.

"Seems like I hear somebody coming, Doc," he volunteered now. "Horses' hoofs on the road. Maybe you'd better yell."

"It won't do any harm, anyway," Lance conceded. He raised his voice. "Hello, up there."

There was a startled ejaculation, then, a moment later, the heavy, puzzled face of Ape Narcross peered down at

them. On either side he was joined by Turkey and Baldy, amazement large on all their features.

" Well, I'll be a son of a gun ! " Ape muttered.

" We met with a little accident," Lance explained. " How about throwing us a rope ? "

Ape's face was still blank with confusion of his thoughts, and Baldy took advantage of the opportunity. His baldness wrinkled for a moment in what was intended as a grin.

" A rope ? " he repeated. " Shore, now, that looks like a good idea. If we only had a rope. But me, I come off without one tuh-day. Right careless of me."

" I got one," Turkey volunteered, his big red nose lending to the illusion of a turkey gobbler peering down at them. " Only I'm shore afraid it's too short. Yuh got one though, Ape."

" Yeh, I got one," Ape snorted. "But I'm sure not going tuh tie it on to yores, Turkey. Yuh gone crazy?"

A root of the bush to which Lance clung, popped with a small, tired report, a little dirt exploding away from the spot. They couldn't hold on many minutes longer. Ape, full understanding having come to him now, and seeing that time was working to finish his job, guffawed noisily.

"How they got perched out there like chickens on a wagon tongue, beats me," he rumbled. "But the tongue's sure bustin' off under 'em. Which'll finish the job up right pretty."

MacVeigh's face reddened, he moved suddenly, and more dirt slid.

"Damn you, Ape Narcross," he roared. "This is the sort of thing I'd expect from a murdering bunch like the Neckyoke——"

"Shut up," Lance ordered shortly. "You can't afford to excite yourself."

"Can't do any harm now, and I'll tell them skunks what I think of them if it's the last thing I do."

" It will be the last thing you do, in that case," Lance

warned grimly. "Keep quiet and let me manage this. I have sort of a hankering to go on living for a while, even if you don't." He raised his voice, though it was still quiet, almost repressed.

"You'd really better throw us a rope, Ape. For you'll live just long enough to regret it if you don't."

"Me, I'll go right on livin'," Ape growled. "But you won't. Yuh got in my way once—and hombres that tries that, don't live tuh make the same mistake twice. This here is just finishin' up what I started the other time."

"Is Dave Randall anywhere around?" Lance demanded, watching with fascination the slow giving way of the clinging roots. His heels, too, dug in as they were, felt as though they would tear loose at any time. Down below, the river waited, sullen of mood, as though, having had a taste of blood, its turgid current hungered for more.

"Randall, he ain't in on this," Ape snorted. "There's times when he damn near gets squeamish about the way things are done. He can hear all about it after it's done with."

Lance calculated the probable moments remaining before they would go hurtling down the rest of the way. Once started anew on that plunge, nothing could save them. Seconds were running out like sands in a hour-glass, and yet this thing, the one chance which they had, couldn't be hurried too much. He even contrived to grin a little at the faces peering expectantly down from above.

"Ape," he said, and something in the very quietness of his tones seemed to catch the attention of the trio. "Mac and me, here, we're in a tight spot—but if it comes to dying, now, this way, or the way the rest of you fellows will die in a few days, if I go now—well, I'd sure choose this way. It's quick and sure. And easy. The other'll be just as sure—but it won't be half as quick or easy to take."

Uneasiness popped out on Ape's heavy face like sweat. His eyes seemed to bulge.

‘‘What the devil yuh talkin' about?’’ he demanded. ‘‘Ain't nothin' can bother me.’’

‘‘That's where you're wrong. You're marked for death, right now—by something a lot surer and deadlier than a bullet.’’ Another root popped sharply, and Lance paused, a curious dryness in his throat. Then, as nothing happened, he went on.

‘‘I'm giving you fair warning, Ape. Either you throw us a rope and get us safe back up there—and you'd better hurry—or all three of you will be dead within ten days.’’

‘‘Yuh're lyin',’’ Ape scoffed, but his tone held no conviction. ‘‘Tryin' tuh scare us. There ain't a thing yuh can do—not when yuh're dead.’’

‘‘That's true. When I'm dead, I can't do a thing for you. It's something bigger than me that's roosting in your blood now like a vulture. I'm not lying. When a man's standing on the brink of death, he doesn't lie.’’

Turkey's face was openly worried now, Baldy's was a blank sheet. Ape scowled doubtfully.

‘‘Yuh keep on talkin',’’ he said. ‘‘But that don't hurt nobody.’’

‘‘It's more than talk, Ape.’’ Lance wondered how much longer he could cling there. MacVeigh was helping him all he could, now, but they had slid a little, then somehow stopped again.

‘‘Remember that Indian, Lone Eagle Feather, who was over at the Neckyoke the other day? And you'll recall that he said he was sick.’’

‘‘He's always sick till he gets his belly full,’’ Ape growled. ‘‘What about him?’’

‘‘A full belly's no cure for what ailed him that time, Ape. It just happens he was sick. Mighty sick.’’ Lance was coming to the crux of his argument now. It had consumed precious time in leading up to it, but with a thick head like Ape, that was the only way to get an idea across at all.

"I've been over to see him, and his tribe, every day since then. Ever hear of the red plague?"

Ape's voice was suddenly hoarse.

"Yuh—yuh mean——" he gasped.

"I mean smallpox. He was coming down with it that day—and every man on the Neckyoke has been exposed. In just a few days, you'll be coming down with it."

It seemed to Lance that he and the cattleman were clinging there now by will-power alone. Surely there wasn't much else to hold them from that dizzy plunge. The river swirled with little, muttering noises, the sun had dipped under scudding cloud. Ape's mouth worked.

"It—it's a lie," he protested hoarsely. "It can't be."

"If that's the way you feel about it, then I can't help you any. But if I die, there's no other medico in this country—and not a chance for any of you. You know that. If I'm alive—well, I'll do the best I can for all of you, since that's my job. Don't forget that you were sitting beside the Indian at supper."

Sudden terror was on Ape's face as conviction came home. He turned, almost frantically, shouting to the others. A moment later, two lariats tied together came sliding down the slope. And in that moment, with a sudden flurry of dust, the last roots exploded loose in the doctor's face even as the dirt beneath his heels gave way.

CHAPTER X

THE FORBIDDEN COUNTRY

LANCE'S clutching hand grabbed for the rope and missed. Already they were starting to slide. And then, leaning far over the brink above, in imminent

danger of hurtling headlong after them, Turkey managed to shake out a couple extra feet of rope, and Reese MacVeigh's fingers caught the very end, closed with the strength of desperation.

For a moment they clung there, dirt rattling out from beneath them and sliding on down. Lance reached up and got a grip on the rope as well. MacVeigh's face was white and strained, and Lance saw that the strain of the last quarter-hour had taken its toll of the sick man. Only will-power, a fighting resolution, had kept him going this long. Now, with succour in sight, he suddenly slumped heavily, a dead weight, eyes closed.

Jaw set, Lance hung on. The sudden strain on him was almost too much, but he had to keep both arms around MacVeigh, and get a better grip on the rope as well. Ape's voice, hoarse with apprehension, came down.

"Let go of that hombre and we'll pull yuh up, Doc. We can't get yuh both up."

"It's both of us or neither," Lance said grimly. He had a better grip now, his arms under MacVeigh's arms, MacVeigh's head slumped loosely across his right shoulder. "Pull, now. Steady does it."

Ape protested no more. He seemed to realize the hopelessness of it, and the three of them were pulling together. Clinging to the rope, using his feet as much as he could, supporting the weight of MacVeigh, they came gradually up to safety. Lance's face was white when they reached the top. The strain had told on him as well. He couldn't have gone much further.

"Now what?" Ape growled sullenly, glaring at MacVeigh.

"Get a wagon on the other side of that rock, so that we can keep going, and don't waste time," Lance ordered. "Until he's home and taken care of, that has to come first. Move fast."

"I'll get it myself," Ape agreed. He strode towards where his saddled horse stood, which snorted and veered away as he grabbed at the reins. Ape controlled it

expertly, swung into the saddle, and as he turned it towards the narrow path that led around the big boulder, the cub bear appeared again.

Ape's cayuse snorted, tried to swing, and seemed for a moment in imminent danger of following the other team in a plunge. Cursing, Ape jerked at his gun, emptied it with savage relentlessness into the bear which, growling and trying to claw at its throat, collapsed at the edge of the road.

"Throw it over, out of the way," Ape snarled, and was past the barrier and spurring furiously.

MacVeigh's wound, fortunately, had not broken open again. He would be set back a day or so, but beyond that, Lance hoped, he should suffer no ill effects. Sheer strain and exhaustion were the worst result.

Mavis returned just ahead of the wagon, and the concern in her eyes gave way to storm as she learned what had happened. Scarcely had she been told the details when Ape drove up with a lathered team, having made the trip to the Neckyoke and back in record time. MacVeigh, conscious again, was loaded in and the trip resumed.

"I never thought I'd be ridin' in a Neckyoke wagon," he commented. "But I guess it beats walkin'."

The Broken Chain, Lance saw, was all that MacVeigh had claimed for it. It came close to being a garden spot, an oasis in the midst of a desert. A big red barn, corrals, a well-built house of native stone, with trees and bushes and the shelter of low hills, a creek winding its way through lush meadows, made a vast difference from the barrenness of Windspur.

Lance spent the night at the ranch. Already, his announcement of the red plague which impended had struck terror on the range, had spread like the blowing pollen of a puffball all across its barren reaches, and for the moment, in the dismay of this news, the feud was relegated to a secondary place.

With MacVeigh in good condition the next morning,

he left, riding horseback and taking a new route, to call at the reservation and see how his original patients were getting along. So far, none of them had succumbed, and he hoped to pull them all through it.

It was a dozen odd miles across some of the bleakest, most barren of all the Desolates, a section new to him. Here all marked trails were left behind. Stark and riven hills seemed to be frozen in an agony above the surrounding terrain. It looked to be a country inhabited only by coyotes and rattlesnakes.

The bright sun of the day before and its warmth were gone to-day. A sullen sky rested moodily on the low horizon and puckered its face for storm. A wind moaned out of the west with little eerie whistlings and capers, lashing at the sparse grass underfoot and twisting the whitish ground to sudden gusts of dust-laden fury.

Ahead was a vast bowl-like depression, a forgotten sink-hole. Lance checked his horse to gaze upon it, was about to turn and skirt the edges when a faint call reached his ears. Puzzled, he stared about, then as it came again, he saw a tiny figure waving frantically from the depths of the bowl.

Excitement shook him. The figure was in a smaller cup-like depression in the infinitude of the larger bowl, and this cup looked to be surrounded by ledges. He lifted his hat in answer, rode towards it. He was too far away for eyesight to be accurate, but he had no doubts as to the identity of that lonesome figure in the midst of this vast desolation. Linda.

Closer approach showed the cup to be much bigger than it had appeared from the distance, hemmed in by high, sheer walls on every side. How Linda could have gotten in there in the first place was a puzzle. There seemed to be no trail in or out. But his first sure instinct was confirmed as he glimpsed her down below. It was Linda Randall.

She was calling out, but the moan of the wind here whipped words away like whispers in the night. Lance

waved reassuringly, circled in an attempt to find some way into the bowl. He was out of sight of Linda now, but here, near the opposite end, was a trail of sorts which promised, leading between huge boulders like the dropped and neglected marbles of a vanished giant, a crack in the walls that narrowed to a trail hardly more than wide enough for his horse to pick its way along.

It wound and twisted, presenting the almost constant illusion that, just ahead, it ended in sheer rocky barriers, yet always there was an opening as he came. And then, all at once, the bowl was ahead, and Linda was running towards him, crying frantically.

"Oh—oh, Lance," she sobbed. "I tried to get here to stop you—I tried to tell you——"

"Why, what's the trouble?" he asked, dismounting and putting one arm reassuringly about her shoulders. For a moment she only clung to him, her head buried against his chest, sobbing. She was overwrought, and no wonder, after being lost in such a place as this.

"You're in the trap now, the same as me," she said, and pointed to the way he had come. "We can't get out. I tried to tell you, but you couldn't hear me. Then I tried to get to this end in time to stop you, somehow, but I couldn't quite make it."

Lance looked, and felt his blood chill a little, as though a darker shadow had swept across the valley. The path had seemed at several points to close, but it had never quite done so. Yet the place where he had just come in was now of apparently solid rock.

He walked towards it, Linda by his side, still clinging to his arms as though she would never let go. Here the trail had dipped down sharply, so that, from this side, it presented a fast rise. It was where he had just ridden, there was no doubt of that. Yet it was a solid wall of rock.

"Oh, Lance, I'm sorry to get you into this—terribly sorry," Linda said, and her clutch on his arm was almost feverish. "If it only hadn't been for the everlasting wind——"

The wind. That was it. In this place it moaned high and shrill and constant, like the wail of lost souls in torment. An overtone as drear and unceasing as the dull grey of the rocks and hills.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll find some way out. Have you figured this out yet?"

It looked to him, incredible as it seemed, like twin gates of stone, which fitted together with such precision that a knife-blade could not be fitted between them. He had ridden through an arch, the top two or three feet above his head. It reared high and unscalable now, and the arch itself was closed by these gates of rock.

They must have opened as he advanced from the other side, and closed of their own accord behind him. The thing was somehow uncanny, yet in perfect keeping with this whole place.

"I don't know," Linda confessed. "I think this must be what the Indians call the Forbidden Country—the place of the evil spirits. Lone Eagle Feather has told me a little about it. As I understand it, rather terrible sacrificial rites were conducted here at some hidden place in the hills, in ancient times. It was said that whoever came this way, never returned. The tribe who lived here has long since disappeared, and white men and Indians alike have shunned this whole section of country ever since I can remember."

That was interesting, but it might be just tradition, or superstition. Yet it might have a foundation in authenticity. These stones had been set in this natural archway at some time in the past by master craftsmen. They looked natural, yet he could see that they must be set smoothly on hidden pivots, and the way they fitted was something to marvel at. To push against them was like pushing against the side of a hill.

Something made them open inward as a man or horse came this way—doing it so smoothly and naturally that the victim, having seen several times already where the trail apparently ended in a blank wall, was totally

unaware of the trap until he had entered and it had closed behind him. There must be some secret way to open it from this side—but finding it would not be easy.

"I've been trying for three days to find some hidden catch, or something, to open them," Linda said, as though reading his thoughts. "I can't find a thing."

She held up her hands, the fingers worn almost through the skin from a patient and endless search of the rocks. There was a vast relief in her eyes as she looked at him, for human companionship, and he knew how close she must have come to despair, even to moments of madness, caught in such a place as this. The relief was tempered with dismay that he should be a prisoner now as well.

"There's no other way out then ?" he asked quietly.

"No," she agreed. "The walls are smooth as glass, and no chance to climb. I've looked everywhere."

A look around from where they stood seemed to confirm that. Knowing her spirit, he could understand that she had tried desperately to find some possible way.

"How have you gotten along ?" he asked. "Have you had anything to eat, or drink ?"

"Yes. Somebody has been here not so long ago—certainly since the Indians." She smiled wryly. "There's a cave off at one side, and it had quite a few supplies, hung in a sack from the ceiling—flour and beans and canned goods and things to cook with, and there was a pile of wood as well. There's a small pool of good water too. I've been all right, that way."

"But you haven't seen anybody since you came ?"

"Not a soul, until you showed up."

"How on earth did you get here ?"

"Well, you remember the other day, back in town? "

"Yes. You acted as if you wanted to tell me something, though you didn't."

"I was so terribly discouraged," she confessed. "I was thinking of getting clear out of this desolate country, and staying. It was a wild idea, I suppose. I didn't care much what happened to me, with things going as

they were. I guess I rode rather aimlessly, and the first thing I knew, I was off in this country, where I'd never been before. And that gave me a new idea."

She led the way to the cave, picked up an old, battered felt hat, and handed it to him.

"It wasn't such a wild ride, either," she added. "I still keep looking for Sam—my brother—whenever I'm off in the hills. I can't believe that he is dead. I found that path, and I left my horse, and followed it on foot. Maybe I wouldn't have kept on—only I found this, on that path.

Lance took up the hat. It was dirty and battered, but there was one distinctive thing about it—a three-cornered slit in the crown, about an inch in size. A slit plainly made a long time before.

"It's Sam's hat," she said simply. "He was wearing it the last time I ever saw him. I'm not sure, but I think that someone took a shot at him, and that he cut that three-cornered hole to take the bullet mark out, so that no one would notice. He said it was for ventilation, to cool his brains."

Lance fingered the old headpiece thoughtfully. There was something funny here—mighty funny. Her finding it on that trail was doubly so.

"And your horse was left outside?"

"Yes. When I got in, and couldn't get out, I kept hoping that my horse would go home and somehow attract attention."

"I'm pretty sure that your horse hasn't returned to the Neckyoke at all, or shown up anywhere else," Lance said. All that was queer. Unpleasantly so. It had all the look of a trap, baited with that hat. If that was so, what would the next step be? And when?

CHAPTER XI

THE DEATH CHANT

A STORM was on its way, to add to their troubles. There was snow in the distance now, like a white sheet being shaken out, and it would soon be here. Storm would mean the closing down of bitter cold. And this, decidedly, was no place to be trapped under such conditions. The meagre supply of wood had nearly been exhausted, and it had been packed in here from somewhere beyond the borders of the sink-hole. There was not even vegetation for his horse in this place.

That threat was bad enough, but it worried the doctor less than the other prospect. That hat on the trail, and the fact that Linda's horse had never returned home. Those were not accidents. Who was behind this ? and what could be their purpose ? Certainly the Broken Chain, with Reese MacVeigh on a sick-bed, could have no connection.

The conviction was strong in his mind that, Linda having already been trapped here for several days, something was going to happen ; also that it must come soon. Which again was a potent reason for getting out.

But how ? There must be some way to open these stone gates from this side. But if Linda had searched so fruitlessly all these days, without finding it, it would be folly to waste more time that way.

"Look ! " said Linda.

Lance had seen them already—three horsemen, merging out of the closing line of storm, trotting with steady precision towards the bowl, heading without hesitation for the trail in. Proof enough that they knew just where they were going, and why. If they had hesitated, they might have been friends. Only enemies could know their way about such a place.

"One of them is riding my horse," Linda said suddenly. "Do you suppose——"

"I imagine we'll soon find out what it's all about," Lance nodded. "Keep your chin up, Linda. I'm glad that I'm here with you, anyway."

She gave him a quick glance, looked away again. "So am I," she said simply.

He had seen what, at the distance, Linda had apparently failed to note. Each of the riders rode masked. It seemed to be a long mask which covered the whole face, made of some light-coloured material not easily visible in the gloom. That wasn't reassuring, either, though by now they had dipped into the trail and out of sight.

For the first time since coming to Desolate Range, Lance wished that he packed a gun. Still maybe he was better off without it. There was only his little black bag. He eyed it thoughtfully.

They were entering the sink-hole itself now, coming through the opening gates like wraiths out of the storm—lounging easy in the saddle, each with a drawn six-gun at the ready, slitted eyes seeming to mock from behind their masks. Somehow those light-coloured expressionless masks gave them a rather ghostly appearance. If the sight of Lance occasioned them any surprise, they did not betray it by word or gesture.

Behind them, the doctor saw, the gates had closed smoothly again, but they did not even bother to glance back. Linda stood close to him, and he could feel her trembling a little, though her chin was high, her eyes defiant. The three dismounted, one of them approached.

"Evening', folks," he greeted casually. "Here comes the snow. And we kind of blew in along with it, looks like. The damnedest—er, excuse me, ma'am, but some funny things sure blow up in the country, don't they? Well, you folks won't take it as bein' any more'n a normal precaution if we kind of pat yuh over for weppons, I hope. Since it has to be done."

"Go right ahead," Lance invited. "And if you find any, halves on 'em."

The leader chuckled, his hands quick and expert ran over Lance's figure.

"That's the proper spirit," he commended. "Some jobs have tuh be done, which ain't always pleasant. Yuh must be the new medico. I've heard yuh had plenty of nerve. But no guns, seems like. Now, if yuh ain't in too big a hurry, we'll just cook up a meal and get outside of it, next thing. All of us. Makes a ride go that much better."

"You won't find us quarrelling any with that programme," Lance agreed. "Are we going for a ride?"

"Well, seems like that's the only way to get out of here except for walkin'. So I sort of figgered we would. Less yuh folks like it better here?"

"I can't say that the place has any compelling attractions."

"Guess they kind of overlooked that angle in layin' it out. Not exactly aimed for a summer resort."

"You couldn't tell us where we're going?"

"Doc, yuh underestimate me. I could. Only, as it happens, I don't see fit to do same."

This hombre was pleasant, but close-mouthed. His companions, except when he spoke to them, said nothing at all. They had packs tied behind their saddles, and presently a little fire was blazing in the cave-mouth, with biscuits baking and bacon sizzling. From the way they went at it, it was plain that they were old hands at this sort of range cookery. Outside, by now, the storm had arrived in earnest, the air was choked with snow. It had grown quite dark despite the earliness of the hour.

Lance ate, puzzled. It was plain to him that Linda did not know these three, nor had he seen them before. Which meant they were not from either the Neckyoke or the Broken Chain. What they had in mind was only to be guessed at, but since they plainly had been concerned in Linda's captivity it did not sound promising.

That they were in no hurry was apparent. They ate leisurely, if with some difficulty through the masks, packed a few small things which were in the cave, and then the leader paused to point to a big boulder which reared up near the cave mouth.

"Reckon that stone has seen some dark and bloody days," he commented. "It's what they used tuh call a sacrificial altar, back in the old days. There's some old steps cut in it, leadin' up to the top, yuh'll notice. And there's still blood-stains to be seen."

This information appeared to be thrown in gratis. They saddled again, producing an extra horse for Linda from somewhere in the outer darkness. The leader sounded a little apologetic as they prepared to start.

"From the things I've heard about yuh, Doc, it don't pay to take chances," he explained. "And any daughter of Dave Randall, the same thing probably goes double for. So, while it ain't that we enjoy doing it, still I guess we'll just have tuh tie your hands, as a sort of safety measure. Get on, and we'll tie 'em together, fast tuh your saddlehorns. That way, you can handle yore cayuses all right."

"Are we prisoners, then?" Linda demanded, her face a little white.

"Well, ma'am, that'd be one way of puttin' it. They say a skunk called a pussy cat can still be as perfumerous."

Since there was nothing else to do, they submitted to being tied. It was past mid-afternoon when they prepared to leave the sink-hole, and with the steadily driving storm, it was almost dark. Lance judged that this delay had been deliberate, so that, as darkness settled, they would have no idea of where they were being taken.

There was no indication which Lance could see, as to how the stone gates were opened again as they approached them, but they were open, permitting them to ride through without difficulty. They followed the narrow, winding trail in silence, two of their captors

riding ahead, Linda next in line, followed by Lance, with the third guard coming behind. Much of the same file was maintained after they had left the bowl behind and were heading out into the teeth of the storm.

For nearly an hour they rode at a methodical jog-trot, in almost complete silence save for the creak of saddle-leather, the blowing of the horses and an occasional hoof-stroke against a rock. It was raw and uncomfortable, and Lance judged that their captors were enjoying it no better than themselves.

He had ceased to speculate as to where they were being taken, or for what purpose. Though his curiosity was aroused as to what it was all about, he had no desire to find out by experience—not now, with so much waiting to be done, and Linda a fellow prisoner.

By now it was too dark to see a yard in advance, and time for work. Linda roused a little, glanced up to find the doctor's horse alongside her own, his hand reaching across to hers. A knife gleamed briefly, and her bonds fell away. She saw his signal to pull her horse out of the procession and follow him.

Jogging mechanically, mile on mile, their captors had grown a little careless. The man who rode behind did not follow closely, and she saw that they had left all three maskers behind and pulled to one side in the gloom without being noticed. Lance had set his horse at right-angles to the course they had been following, was increasing the pace now.

For another quarter-hour they rode in silence. By then there was no question but what they had eluded the others. Finding them again on such a night would be sheer chance, not skill. She pushed alongside him.

"Lance! How did you do it? It seemed so easy, the casual way you handled it all."

The doctor chuckled a little.

"That was easy," he admitted. "Everything considered. I just had a hunch, when they were coming, that they might not be too friendly. So I slipped a

scalpel up my sleeve, kind of fastened it there, and waited. When I got ready, I shook it down, into my fingers, and cutting loose was a lot easier, for instance, than tying up a vein, inside a person's body."

"I should think it would be. But it was clever, just the same. I wonder who they were—or who they can be working for?"

"You haven't any idea?"

"Not the slightest. Have you?"

"Only thing I can think of, is Danny Darrel—and his curse. Maybe they're working for him."

"For his ghost?" There was a thread of scorn in her voice. "You don't believe in such stuff, surely?"

"My Dad was one of the three it was levelled against—and his family, while they lasted. The same as your Dad, MacVeigh, and so on. I don't believe in it, no—and then again, sometimes I don't know. If you've a better idea——"

"I haven't, unfortunately." Her voice was puzzled. "I can't figure it out. But Danny Darrel has been dead all these years——"

"And ghosts don't walk. Or do they? The old curse seems to be keeping pretty active. But there's something else just about as bad, so you'd better stop right here for a while."

"Where are we?"

"The Indian camp's just a little way ahead. Most of them are sick. Smallpox."

"Smallpox?" Her voice was startled, and he remembered that she had had no chance to hear the news. "But in that case, I can go with you. I was vaccinated last year, and it worked."

"How did that happen?" She could hear his sigh of relief. "Didn't anybody else from the Neckyoke take the treatment?"

"No. I was down to the city, and there was kind of a scare so I had it done."

"Well that helps. A lot. For I'm afraid we're in

for a bad time with it, on this range. Hear that?" His voice took on a new note. "It's here."

From ahead came a dirge-like chant—rising and falling. The death chant.

CHAPTER XII

KILL OR CURE

THE Doctor's face, by the time they reached town, an hour after daybreak, was grim. One man had died at the Indian encampment, which was hardly to be wondered at, for several of them had been sick with the disease before he had reached them first. The others were doing as well as could be expected—almost better than he had dared hope for. But this was only the beginning.

From the camp they had gone on to the Neckyoke, and years had been lifted from the face of Dave Randall at sight of his daughter. Lance, however, had refused to stop, even at that time of the night, for a few hours of sleep.

"I've got to get back to town," he explained. "I was delayed a lot yesterday——"

"I know," Randall nodded grimly. "I'm sorry about that, Doc. And it wasn't any of my doing."

"That's all right. But I was expecting some medicine in on the stage yesterday. And it'll be needed right away—and bad. You and your men had better ride in to town, first thing in the morning, to be vaccinated."

Randall was in no mood to argue, after the events of the past twenty-four hours.

"We'll be there," he promised. "But you shouldn't drive yourself too hard. You need a few hours' sleep. Besides, it's snowing hard, and getting cold—to say

nothing of being blacker than the inside of a dead wolf.''

''Thanks, but I'll keep travelling,'' Lance insisted, and stopped in dismay to find Linda beside him again.

''I'm going with you,'' she said quietly. ''You'll need a nurse—and I've been vaccinated, remember.''

''Why, why—that's fine,'' Lance stammered, taken aback for once. ''But you need a good rest first. You can come in with your father in the morning.''

'' If you go now, I'm going along,'' she insisted. ''For the last three or four days I've had nothing to do but rest, and you'll need help.''

Remembering those torn hands of hers, Lance was sceptical about the rest. But there was no point to arguing. They rode, side by side, in a silent companionship which somehow made the trail seem easier, the storm buffeting them steadily. Windspur was just beginning to stir when they arrived, with little drifts here and there along its deserted streets, the snow whipping about in the freakish blasts. The restaurant was not yet open, nor the saloons.

Leaving their horses in the livery stable, Lance led the way, climbing the slippery stairs to the second floor. His rooms were deserted and cheerless this morning, but he went at once to the stove in a corner and presently had a fire blazing, driving away some of the dank chill. Only then did he turn to look for what should have come the day before, his face growing a little more set as he failed to find it.

From below there was a clatter as the bartender struggled with the big heater in the saloon, and Lance descended to interview him. Casey turned, bald head gleaming, his one good eye warm and genial, nodded.

'' Mornin', Doc. Looks kinda wintry out tuh-day.''

'' Looks seem to be right,'' Lance agreed. ''Did anything come in on the stage for me yesterday, Casey ? ''

Casey paused, scratching his head, leaving a line of soot from his fingers in a cabalistic design over his dome. Then he shook his head.

"Don't remember anything, Doc. Was yuh expectin' something ? "

"There should have been a package. There must have been."

Casey's face brightened.

"Say, I bet I know what happened. There was a hold-up down the line a piece, first they've had in more'n a year. I heard the driver cussin' a blue streak about it. He said the bandits took what money they could find and threw the rest uh the stuff, that they didn't want, in the creek. If yuh had something coming, that must be what happened to it. Nothin' important, was it?"

Nothing important! Lance's face was white and set. He turned heavily away.

"Vaccine," he said. "I sent for it as soon as I arrived here—smallpox vaccine."

Casey's rotund face was suddenly strained.

"I heard the talk about that smallpox," he gasped. "Yuh mean yuh ain't got no medicine, Doc ? "

"I didn't have any when I came. And it's too late to order any again, and get it here in time to help." Lance made no mention of the fact that he had used all his money in paying for that lost order. The money was a trivial thing, compared to the rest of it.

"G-gosh ! " As the import of this sunk in, Casey staggered back against the bar, his eye roving vacantly over the rows of bottles. It brightened a little.

"Would a good strong shot uh whisky help any, tuh ward it off, Doc ? " he asked hopefully.

"Be about the worst thing you could take," Lance rejoined. He turned to the door, halted as Casey's voice came plaintively.

"Golly, Doc ! Ain't there a thing yuh can do ? "

"There's something I'm going to do ! " Lance nodded grimly. "It's strong medicine, and maybe kill or cure. But there's no choice left, now."

"Meanin' what ? "

"I was afraid of this, so I made a culture from the pox

on Lone Eagle Feather. I've no way of knowing how it will work—except by testing it out on people. I've neither time nor facilities for making other tests. It may be too strong, and give 'em the disease—but I think not. Anyway, it's the last chance, so I'll vaccinate anybody who has the nerve to try it. For they'll get it anyway, otherwise."

Casey blinked. Even in those simple words, the thing was a bit beyond his understanding, but it had a rather dubious sound. This, he gathered, was pioneer medicine—a man experimenting beyond his actual horizon of experience, pitting his skill and knowledge against something that was beyond the realm of the ordinary practitioner. Casey had no way of knowing that such pioneers had discovered as many new fields as other men had found new lands. But he could sense it. Now he made up his mind.

"I'm game tuh have it tried on me, Doc. Any time."

"Thanks Casey. I think it's the sensible thing to do. Step up to my office in about an hour and we'll give you a shot."

He tramped back upstairs again. The stove was dispelling the chill now with a flushed smile. Linda was busy cleaning the room. She looked up as he entered, and he reported briefly, also as to what he intended to do.

She studied his face gravely for a moment, nodded.

"I'm sure that you'll have things fixed to work all right," she said. "I've heard of such things being used in emergencies—by men who were big enough to take a chance. And you seem to know what you're doing most of the time."

"Let's hope that this is one of the times," Lance nodded. Her faith, coupled with Casey's willingness to take a chance, was heartening, but he needed it all. It was a risk in any case, such a drastic remedy as he must use; coupled with the fact that some of his patients would probably already be infected with the deadly virus of the disease merely served to complicate things. Smallpox

in actual practice, was outside of his experience. Theory was one thing, the doing was another. Theoretically, he knew that it ought to work—but it was a remedy that might kill if it failed to cure.

"Let's go out and get some breakfast," he added. "We'll have a busy day."

That last was no idle prophecy. He had hardly set his instruments and supplies in order when patients began to arrive, eager for treatment. One of the first demanded to know why he had not vaccinated everybody in the country as soon as he knew that an epidemic of smallpox impended?

"Because I didn't have any vaccine," Lance retorted bluntly.

"Yuh should have been prepared——"

Footsteps pounded on the stairway outside, and Dave Randall pushed open the door, followed by Ape Narcross and most of the Neckyoke crew. Dave glanced quickly at his daughter, heating water on the stove and ready with cloths, and smiled a little.

"Well, we're here, Doc," he nodded. "Ready for whatever you want to do to us."

"I think I'd better tell you, in the first place, that the stage was robbed yesterday, and the supplies I sent for didn't arrive," Lance said evenly. "And it will be too late to order any more."

Ape's heavy face was blank.

"But you promised you'd do something for us——"

"Yes. I have a vaccine which I made myself—from the pox on Lone Eagle Feather. I think it will work. It may not. There's a chance that it will be worse than nothing. But it's that against the almost certain thing of all of you from the Neckyoke getting the disease if you don't take it. I figured it was only fair to tell you."

Ape's face was still blank. Dave Randall spoke quietly.

"You mean, it's a case of kill or cure?"

"It amounts to about that, I'm afraid."

The recalcitrant gambler who had been there first, looked ugly.

"Yuh're a hell of a medico, if yuh ask me——"

"Nobody's asking your opinion, hombre." That was Slim Lonegran, and though his voice was quiet, the other man choked and fell suddenly silent. Slim was casually rolling up his shirt-sleeve. "This arm the one you want, Doc?"

"Be as good as any, Slim." Lance dipped his instrument for a moment in the pan of hot water, turned back to Slim. "Do you prefer a hen-track or turkey-track design?"

"Make it a squirrel scratchin' up a tree," Slim suggested. "All over with? Gosh, some folks'll think they ain't gettin' their money's worth."

Ape had bared his own arm, now, as Randall was doing, and seeing them, the gambler was following suit.

"Reckon it's all up to you, Doc," Ape grunted. "Let 'er go."

Lance studied him a moment, nodded. Already Ape was beginning to be a sick man. This might counteract it, or it might be the finishing touch. And he was the disbarred medico who had made up his mind not long before that he was through with taking such responsibility of life and death into his own hands. Lance's face was set and hard as he pricked the needle again.

CHAPTER XIII

AN OLD ENEMY

It was, as he had predicted, a long day. Most of the forenoon was occupied with patients who came to the office, and in addition there was a shooting in one of the

other saloons. Of the two principals involved, one was beyond the need of a doctor's care, but the other took an hour to patch up.

Then he had to make calls—several of them. The worst of it was to combat the fear which gripped the range like a pall. Already in isolated sections there were three or four outbreaks of the disease, and his biggest job, aside from covering so much territory, was to try and dispel the fear, to infuse hope into people.

Here again his own words came back to plague him. Turkey and Baldy had repeated the threats he had used to force them to throw down a rope to Reese MacVeigh and himself—that death itself impended in dreadful form. Garbled in the telling, all this had struck added terror. And there was too much of truth in it at best to be lightly brushed aside.

By nightfall again, with the snow still sifting down, dismay gripped the doctor. How on earth could he ever cover the necessary territory to look after his patients? It was long past the coming of darkness before he stumbled up the stairs towards his office, and paused for a moment outside the door to curse under his breath. He had given Linda strict orders to go to the room her father had secured for her and get a good night's sleep. Yet a light still shone from under the door.

He pushed open the door, intending to lecture her on waiting for him, paused in blank-faced astonishment, then slowly closed the door and leaned his back against it.

The man who had been seated in the doctor's chair before the stove looked up to nod affably and rise to his feet. He was a man of indefinite age—anywhere between thirty and sixty, with hair of a sandy cast that defied age to change it, and an unwrinkled smooth-shaven face, with eyes mildly blue—eyes which, Lance knew, could be chilled steel or mocking and sardonic.

"Evening, Doctor," he nodded. "You look as if you'd had a hard day. Here, sit down and drink this coffee. I've been making myself at home, you see, and

I made some coffee. Figured you'd want some, and I knew I did.''

He lifted a pot from the stove, poured a cup of strong black solution and pushed it towards Lance, genial and competent. Lance accepted it still in silence, drank it straight. It was warming after the long chill of miles in the saddle, stimulating. He set the empty cup down, stretched luxuriously in another chair which his visitor pushed forward for him.

''Didn't expect to see me here, I take it?'' he chuckled.

''No, I didn't, Griggs,'' Lance confessed. His eyes swept the other man without warmth. ''In fact, it's what might be called a surprise.''

Doc Griggs, conscious of that scrutiny, coloured a little, then laughed.

''You're wondering about that broken arm of mine,'' he said. ''It's all healed now, good as new. Didn't take too long. For which I'm thankful.''

''It does look all right,'' Lance agreed. His mind had been jerked back to that night in Rimrock, to that operation which this man, then with broken arm in sling, had almost forced him to perform—against his will and better judgment. That operation under which a young girl had died—though she had had little enough chance in any case—and the bleakly accusing words of the man now sitting comfortably in his own office, pouring coffee for him to drink :

'' You've murdered her ! ''

There was silence in the room for a moment. Then, bright and cheerful as a sparrow, Doc Griggs was on his feet again, lifting a covered Dutch oven off the back of the stove, taking dishes from it and placing them on a corner of the desk. An appetizing aroma came from them—mashed potatoes, a cup full of gravy, roast beef, still warm, bread and butter and a big slab of apple-pie.

'' Your nurse—nice girl, seemed like—she had this supper waiting for you, and she told me to keep it warm,'' Griggs explained. ''And I can guess that you're as

empty as a missionary barrel two hours after its arrival, so set up and eat.'' He poured another cup of coffee, watched amiably as Lance fell to without ceremony. Suddenly he shot a question.

'' I've been hearing that you're up against a smallpox epidemic here. Bad as it sounds ? ''

Lance glanced up briefly.

'' Worse.''

Doc Griggs whistled softly.

''In that case, maybe it's lucky I happened along,'' he sighed. ''I was heading for the other side of the range—thought maybe they'd need a medico up that way. I don't aim to horn in on your practice here any, Prescott. But if you say the word, I'll stay and lend a hand till this is over.''

''I wish you would,'' Lance agreed thankfully. Whatever else he was, or was not, Doc Griggs was a good medico. And there would be more than enough work for both of them in the weeks to come.

There was a lot here that Lance didn't understand, and he didn't like Griggs, nor trust him. After that bald accusation of murder—an act, to say the least on a fellow doctor's part, which had been unethical, and which might have many harsher things said about it—he would never have any use for the man. And what Doc Griggs was doing here, or would do, was a matter for not too pleasant speculation.

His turning up here, at this particular time, might be sheer chance, as he had said. But it sounded fishy—as did a broken arm healing in that length of time. His friendliness now, after that last meeting—there was a lot that was wrong, and might be more so at any time.

But if he would turn in and help fight this plague, Lance was prepared to accept him and ask no questions. Save one. He pushed back from the improvised table, cocked his feet on the edge of the desk.

'' It'll be a good thing to have you take a hand here, Griggs. The epidemic's going to be a bad one—all that

both of us can handle, from the looks. Providing, of course, that you're willing to work with a man like myself.''

Griggs waved one hand, holding a pipe, making a little wreath of smoke which hung about his head almost like a halo.

''Anybody has trouble now and then, Prescott,'' he said easily. ''I guess I owe you an apology for what I said that night. In fact I know I do. I was overwrought—but such things happen. I hope you'll not hold it against me.''

Lance made no reply. He was willing to wait and see, but it would be a watchful waiting.

''You got any supplies?'' he asked.

''Some,'' Griggs admitted. ''You have a stock of vaccine, I suppose?''

''Something I've been using for that.'' Lance explained briefly. Griggs whistled.

''Sounds drastic,'' he conceded. ''But under the circumstances, it was all you could do, of course. Well, you'd better get some sleep. You look all in. To-morrow we'll sort of divide the work up and see what we can do.''

The next day was bleak and cheerless, the clouds still pressing down with a heavy hand, though the storm had ended. It was cold—not many degrees above zero. And to-day the situation was worse. There were three new cases, besides Ape Narcross, who was a very sick man. There seemed only one bright spot in the whole affair, and that was furnished by Doc Griggs. The presence of a second medico had done something to fire the morale of the range.

The extra rooms were full of beds now, crowded with patients, and Linda was invaluable as a nurse. Also, Lance admitted grudgingly to himself, Doc Griggs was a good helper. He knew his stuff, and he was working hard and to good purpose. For the next few days there was little rest for either man. Only occasionally did they see each other, pausing briefly to compare notes, to

eat a bit or snatch a little sleep, then out on their rounds again.

It was a little too early to be sure of anything but, Lance was beginning to feel hopeful that, at least as an antidote for those who were already affected with the disease, his drastic vaccine was working. This opinion was confirmed by Doc Griggs. But the real fight mostly lay ahead.

Another week. Lance could hardly keep track of time or its passage. He was called by night as well as by day, and the hours were one grey succession of the endless everywhere. A dozen in town, others at widely scattered points on the range. Many more than he liked to think about.

He had hoped, even starting at that late date, to prevent a general epidemic. But that, it seemed, had been too much to expect. More than one of the Indians had been abroad on the range after they should have been in bed. and they were faced now not with a theory but reality. Without being quite in the realm of logical things, the disease had spread fast and far.

That the vaccine was effective could no longer be doubted. It would immunize those who had been treated in time, working with a virulence that left arms inflamed and swollen for days, but stopping short of the disease itself.

For all that, there were a lot of mighty sick people. And the bad weather held. Lance had had no glimpse of sun or moon for ten days. No stars shone through that grey pall by night. Snowstorms were frequent, the weather was bitterly cold.

All of which was lending a still grimmer complication to Desolate Range. Just when every able-bodied man was needed, and badly, to look after the cattle, a lot of them were laid low by sickness, others were busy with caring for the ill. And as a fresh blizzard swept down from the north, cattle began to be stalled in drifts, stock on the range were freezing and starving.

Lance had ridden out to the Broken Chain, taking a horse from the livery stable. He had ridden the big horse Frosty a lot in these last few days, but even Frosty could not go all the time. It was the doctor's first visit to the Broken Chain in three days.

Reese MacVeigh was making a steady improvement. He was well enough now so that he chafed endlessly at being compelled to sit in the house when there was so much work crying to be done out of doors. But Lance had strictly forbidden him to stir outside in such weather until he gave the word.

"Try it, and you'll likely be attending your own funeral before the week's out," he warned. "Which will be of no help to anyone out here. You're getting well—but you've been sick, and to go out in this cold and overdo it, would finish you."

"But damn it, Doc," MacVeigh protested. "To just sit here and do nothing—with men sick and Mavis out riding the range, trying to do a man's work–it fair drives me wild."

"I know how you feel, but it can't be helped. Especially with your arm swollen as it is. That vaccine worked on you, which is something to be thankful for. As soon as it's better, you can get outside a bit. Where is Mavis?"

"Outside, somewhere. Has been since morning. She always is, these days."

Lance nodded gloomily, visited his other patients, and swung into the saddle again. For one reason or another, the Broken Chain was desperately short-handed now, like most of the other ranches, big and little. He hated to think of Mavis riding the range in such weather as this—especially working alone.

Though there had been little enough time for thinking, the doctor had not forgotten that bleak sink-hole in which he had found Linda, nor the masked trio who had freed them, and from whom they had escaped in the night. He had made no public mention of the incident. That would add needless fears to a range already terror-ridden.

But he had speculated a lot. Who were those men? What was their purpose? Nothing had been seen or heard of them since, but that would not mean that they had left the country. And to have Mavis riding by herself—he didn't like it. She was as likely a victim as Linda.

A steer bawled in hoarse terror and despair, and Lance turned, frowning through the driving storm. Not far off was a heavy snowdrift, and caught in it was a three-year-old dogie with sweeping horns. It had stumbled into the drift, had broken through a half-crust and, with the cold and lack of food to weaken it, had floundered helplessly, finally remaining passive, a prisoner of the deep snow. His coming close had startled it, otherwise it would have remained unmoving until frozen stiff.

Now it was making a frantic effort to get free, but to no purpose. Lance uncoiled the rope he carried tied to his saddle, rode closer and flipped the loop over the captive's horns. Pulling, rope around the saddle-horn, he slowly dragged the big steer free.

Then it happened. Suddenly finding itself loose, doubly frightened by its experience and the rope around its horns, the steer charged fiercely. Lance's horse tried to turn, slipped on hidden ice and fell heavily. The doctor found himself sprawling in the snow. He had a confused glimpse of his cayuse struggling to its feet and galloping away, of the lance-pointed horns of the maddened steer sweeping down at him.

CHAPTER XIV

MURDER MOST FOUL

THERE was no time to get to his feet, no chance to grab for the gun which he had been carrying of late. He tried to roll to one side, but that was like the crawl of a snail where the jump of a grasshopper was needed.

Then, like a sudden white ghost, another horse had come from nowhere and swerved in between the steer and himself, with scant inches to spare. A voice shouted fiercely, a quirt lashing out savagely at the plunging dogie, and it was over. As Lance got a little unsteadily to his feet, the steer was vanishing in the murk, and Mavis was turning her horse, her face strained and anxious.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" she gasped. "I saw your horse go down, and then——"

Her voice broke for a moment as she reined up beside him. Lance nodded, brushing the snow off himself. "I'm still all in one piece and as good as ever—thanks to you. If you hadn't happened along, it might have been a little messy."

For a moment she looked down at him, a strange, unfathomable light in her eyes, her lips curved in a wistful smile. Then she straightened matter-of-factly. This was the range, and she had been raised on it.

"I'll get your cayuse," she said.

Presently she was back, leading it. Lance shot a keen glance at her. Her face still looked white, rather pinched. That was not the result alone of this moment of peril that had threatened him.

"You're working too hard," he said. "You ought to stay home and look after your father. This is no sort of weather for you to be riding the range, anyway."

She smiled at him, a little wearily.

"Dad doesn't need me, and the work has to be done. Besides," and it was as though she was speaking now to herself, "I have to get out—and do something. Otherwise, I can't stand it."

Being a physician, Lance knew what she meant. This was a sickness of the soul. He wasn't sure that he understood in full the cause, but it was there. He swung into the saddle.

"Just the same, I'm going to take you home now. You've been outside enough for one day."

She did not demur. They rode, almost in silence, and

by the time the ranch buildings of the Broken Chain were reached again, Lance had made up his mind to have it out with Reese MacVeigh. Probably it would do no good. But this place, MacVeigh had said, had been a spot which had seemed close to paradise to him, when he had first seen it. It was far from that now, and the cause was not far to seek.

MacVeigh nodded without surprise when he entered the house again.

"I see you've brought her back," he said. "I'm thanking you for that, Doc."

"Let's say rather that she brought me back," Lance contradicted. "I want a few frank words with you, Mac. You're well enough to talk now, and a beginning has to be made somewhere."

The cattleman's eyes narrowed.

"Just what might you mean by that ?" he asked.

"I mean this trouble between you and Dave Randall. You both hate each other—and that hate has poisoned the whole range, spreading like a prairie fire. It has pretty well ruined both your lives. Worse than that, it's killing Mavis. And it's high time it was stopped. After all, you and Dave—and my Dad, were friends, when you first hit this country."

"That's true enough," MacVeigh nodded. "But that was a long time back. And your Dad, like Danny Darrel. has been gone a long time. Also, Dave Randall and me, we've been anything but friendly for about as long."

"And is that any reason why you should go on killing each other's men, trying to kill each other, until you succeed ? Why not bury the hatchet—now that there's so much common trouble on the range—and be friends again ? It's the only sensible thing to do."

MacVeigh shook his head slowly.

"There's nothing I'd like better, Doc. I've always been a man of peace, by preference. And I'm not blind. I can see the things you tell me. I could even forget—and maybe forgive—these tries they've made at killing

me, if it could all be wiped out and forgotten. For I'm remembering, along with the bitter that Dave Randall had had a lot of hard things to take, too. But I'm afraid it's too big a thing for us to stop."

"How do you mean?"

"It sounds silly, of course. More than once I've told myself that I'm a fool. But Danny Darrel made his black curse—and it seems to be something that we can't beat. God knows that I've tried, Doc. When your Dad was killed"—his voice lowered huskily—"it seemed to me that Dave Randall and I were blithering fools to keep on fighting. I'm going to tell you something that nobody else has ever known, except Dave, and he's kept it to himself."

He crossed to the frost-encrusted window, stared out for a long moment at the enveloping bleakness of storm, swung back.

"I went to Dave and told him we were fools. And pledged that we'd quit it all. We shook hands on it—and the next morning, one of Dave's best men, who was one of his best friends as well, was found dead—murdered. That started it off again. What I'm trying to say is, this seems to be too big for either of us to handle. The curse of Danny Darrel sounds fantastic—but it keeps right on working. One of these days, I'm thinking, it'll go all the way and finish us, as he said in the first place."

"That," Lance reminded him quietly, "would take Linda and Mavis, and myself as well."

"Sure it would, boy. Sure it would. But you've had some experience with trouble yourself, haven't you—and your family?"

"Plenty." Lance shook his head. "But I still think the whole idea is fantastic. When I stop to use common sense."

"Sure. When you stop to use common sense. And in the middle of the night you wake up sweating, and your mind is off wild and free, ranging beyond the bounds

of what we call common sense, and we know that there's things in heaven and earth, beyond the understanding of mortal man." MacVeigh sighed. "And then, there's the ghost of Danny Darrel."

"Have you seen it ?"

For a moment Reese MacVeigh seemed to shiver. He sat with his head buried in his hands. Finally he lifted them, his face paler than it had been before.

"Yes," he agreed, simply. "I've seen it. Three or four times since he died. And always something happens soon after—something bad. The last time I saw it was the night before Ape shot me. I woke up and went to look out of the window. And I saw him, standing out there in the moonlight—just as plain as I ever saw him when we slept in the same blankets. And the next instant it was gone—whatever it was."

Lance was a little shaken by the recital. It was tommy-rot, ridiculous—but as MacVeigh said, there were more things than man could compass by common sense, and his own experience had been too bitter not to believe that somehow the curse was a potent thing.

It had killed his father, his mother had died soon after of a broken heart. And it had hounded him all down the years. Just at the times when, by dint of hard work, it would begin to appear that he had beaten it, that he was going to be a success in life, something would strike like a bolt out of the blue—as it had struck in Rimrock.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "But for all that, we're going to beat this thing. If I can get Randall to see sense, will you meet him half-way ?"

"Why not ?" MacVeigh asked quietly. "But I'm afraid there's small chance, Doc. It's probably gone beyond anything that Dave or I could control, already, with a lot of our crews hating as fiercely as ever we have done. And if anything more happens—well, it's smouldered a long time now, with a little flame here and there. It wouldn't take much to make a fire that would

engulf this whole range in red war."

"That's what I want to stop," Lance nodded. "And I intend to, or know the reason why."

He had intended returning straight to town. Instead, he headed in the direction of the Neckyoke. It would be a good idea to see Dave Randall while the weather and the plague kept things quiet on the range, get something definite to go on.

If he could keep the two big outfits from flying at each other's throats, that would give him a chance to see about this ghost that lugged a curse around with it. One thing to be thankful for, anyway. Bad as the weather and the smallpox had made things, together they would keep men from thoughts of murder, or time for it——

He was roused from his reverie by the sudden snort and plunge of his horse. Lance controlled it, edged it around, dancing and blowing, towards a clump of buckbrush, a few brown leaves still fluttering like valiant flags above the snow.

The constant wind kept the snow in driving turmoil here, erasing all sign almost as swiftly as it was made. But something had happened here not long since. The brush was still disturbed, and dismounting, with a sudden sinking of the heart, he saw that it was a man, sprawled face down among the brush and snow. And although he was nearly covered over by the blowing snow, he was still warm to the touch.

Lance lifted him a little, stared. Accustomed as he was to looking on death, there was something horrible here. This man he had seen several times at the Broken Chain. One of MacVeigh's best and most trusted men.

He had been murdered with the blow of a heavy club, which had smashed in his skull and half of his face. And lying in the snow beside him was the weapon, still with blood and hair adhering to it—the half of an old neckyoke.

CHAPTER XV

THE BROKEN CHAIN

It was that piece of neckyoke which made the whole thing doubly shocking. Lance stared down for a moment, considering what this would mean. Reese MacVeigh had promised that he'd meet an offer of peace half-way—providing that nothing more should happen in the meantime.

And even while they had been talking it had been happening, one of his best men being murdered. But there was something funny about that piece of neckyoke, being used to brain a man, and left there for all to see. Any other piece of wood would have done as well, a gun would have been a more apt weapon, more usual. Why a piece of neckyoke, which was not easy to get hold of, unless the idea had been deliberately to stir up trouble between the two outfits ?

And why the murder of Johnny Evarts ? If there was a peaceable, likeable hombre on the whole of Desolate Range, it was Johnny. Probably there had been less of rancour in his soul towards the other outfit, than could be said of any other man on the Broken Chain.

That factor, of course, was well known—so his brutal killing in such fashion would fan resentment more quickly and surely than the killing of most other men, just as the method of his murder would arouse more hate than if it had been done with a gun-shot.

There were no signs of a struggle. He had been struck down from in front, the whole top of his skull and half of his face caved in by the blow. That argued two things. The first, that he had been standing there on foot, while the other man was higher up, probably on horseback. And secondly, he must have been talking in friendly fashion with his slayer, without any suspicion of trouble.

For, peaceful as he was, Johnny Evarts had been a good hand with a gun, and his Colt was still in its holster, undrawn.

Talking to his unsuspecting victim, the neckyoke in one hand, hidden behind his horse and saddle, the slayer could have raised a little in his stirrups, leaned forward suddenly and brought the club down in that smashing blow—and that was the only way it could have been done. Then he had tossed the neckyoke to the ground beside his victim and ridden away, with the storm to cover all signs.

Lance's mind darted back to those three masked figures who had come to the sink for Linda and himself. Without their masks, of course, they might belong to either outfit—but he doubted that.

There was nothing that he could do for Johnny Evarts, but he might be able to do something for innocent men. The doctor rode on, his face set. Half a mile away, where a coulee gouged its way between two small hills, he tossed the neckyoke deep into the thorn-apple choked depths. Another half-mile farther on, as he had hoped for, he met a pair of Broken Chain riders, out looking after the stock. To them he told of finding Johnny Evarts, and where he was at.

"He's been murdered," he reported. "With a club. No telling who did it. You boys look after him—and it wouldn't be a bad idea, way it looks to me, if all of you would take to riding in pairs from now on."

"Somethin' tuh that, mebby, Doc," one of them grated. "Though if I get a line of any Neckyoke hombre over my sights——"

"Now, don't start going off half-cocked," Lance warned. "There's trouble enough now, and it doesn't follow that the Neckyoke had anything to do with it. He was killed by somebody on horseback, sitting there talking to him—somebody he didn't have the lest idea was an enemy. Otherwise it couldn't have been done. Does that sound like a Neckyoke man ?"

"We-el, does sound kind of funny," the cowboy con-

ceded. "Though, bein' Johnny, there ain't no tellin'. Johnny, he's that big-hearted and unsuspicious of everybody, if Dave Randall himself rode up and started tuh talk, he'd figger his intentions was fair."

That was true enough, and Lance pondered it as he rode on. With Dave Randall, of course, his intentions would be fair. He was blunt and outspoken, making no bones of his feeling towards the Broken Chain. But he would not murder a man in such fashion, nor strike from ambush. If he picked a fight, he would make it a fair one.

It had been several days since Lance had visited at the Neckyoke. Doc Griggs had taken over that section of range when it was divided, thus saving both of them from needless miles of riding back and forth over the same territory. And according to his reports, everyone at the Neckyoke had responded well to Lance's heroic treatment, and while some of them were still dangerously ill, all had at least a fighting chance for recovery. Dave Randall himself would apparently escape the disease.

And, sore arm or no, Randall was just riding in from the open range as Lance rode up. He stared for a moment, called a greeting, and they stabled their horses wordlessly, walked up to the house together. Inside, Randall shed his heavy sheepskin coat, pulled icicles from his moustache and sent them rattling on the floor, sank into a chair before a roaring heater and motioned Lance to another. His face was a little anxious.

"Linda all right?" he asked.

"She's fine," Lance agreed. "And doing a great piece of work. You should be proud of her, Randall."

"I am," Dave Randall agreed simply. "Mighty proud. She's all I've got left to be proud of," he added a little huskily. "But I don't suppose you rode out here to talk about her?"

"No. Though I could do worse. Matter of fact, I just came from the Broken Chain."

"Yeah? How they comin'?"

"Much the same as here, in general. They're short-

handed in the storm, which makes it bad. You're the same way, of course."

"We sure are. Makes it one devil of a situation, the plague hittin' here just along with such a mess of weather. Worst winter, so far, that I can remember since I struck this country. And, with the range having the reputation that it does, and the smallpox as well—no chance of getting anybody in to help from outside, for love or money. At that, we've been mighty lucky, havin' you and Doc Griggs."

"How is Griggs getting along here?"

"Doing good work. Seems to know his stuff."

"That's fine. I was talking to Reese MacVeigh today."

Randall stiffened a little, as if guessing what was coming.

"Shoot."

"I told him this feud was a damn-fool affair, Randall. And that it ought to be stopped, by the two of you who could stop it."

"And what'd he say?"

"He agreed to meet you half-way in trying to do that."

Randall's face darkened.

"Doc, I like you. You're Gunning Prescott's son, and he used to be my friend—then my enemy. By rights I should hate you. You've upset a lot of my plans since you hit this range, but you're a man, and like I say, I like you. I'm not forgetting some of the things you've done for me, and I never will. Being that you're Gunning's son, I know your interest in this fuss.

"But, hell, man, there's no use talking. I made an agreement with MacVeigh, years ago, that we would stop it—and what happened? You know. There's been trouble on this range for years—murder, rustling, other things, and not so long back Sam—my son. That's a condition, not a theory, and I'm plumb at the end of my patience. Either the Chain has got to go, or the Neckyoke—and I'm hanged if it'll be the Neckyoke."

His voice softened a little, he smiled a rare smile.

"Like I say, Doc, I like you, and I know you mean well. But that's the way it shapes."

"Speaking of murder," said Lance. "Do you approve of it as a matter of policy?"

Randall's ruddy face was suddenly a little haggard.

"I reckon you've a right to ask that—after some of the things that Ape has pulled lately. I don't approve. And once he's well—if he gets well, for he's a pretty sick man to-day—well, he'll be lookin' for another job. When I fight, Prescott, I aim to fight like hell, but I fight fair."

"Then you didn't send one of your men to murder Johnny Evarts to-day?"

Randall stared.

"Johnny Evarts? What about him?"

"I found him lying out in a patch of buckbrush, over on the Chain. Dead less than an hour, the way it looked. His face had been smashed in, skull crushed, with a club."

There was no question about Randall's amazement being genuine.

"I sure didn't know anything about that," he confessed. "I kind of liked Johnny, to tell the truth, even if he was a Chain man."

"The club," added Lance, "was a pice of neckyoke."

Randall's jaw sagged slightly, closed hard again.

"The devil you say!"

"Exactly. Which makes it look as though somebody wanted to stir up trouble between the two ranches. I don't believe that a Neckyoke man did it, for several reasons." Lance gave them in detail. "But if any Broken Chain man had found that piece of neckyoke, he wouldn't have stopped to reason it out. He'd have seen red, from the jump-off. I tell you, it's time for you and Reese MacVeigh to get some sense in your heads and stop playing someone else's game."

Dave Randall was thoughtfully silent for a while. Like MacVeigh, he arose, crossed to stare out of the window, and returned to his chair.

"Just what did you mean by that last remark ?" he asked softly.

"I wish I knew. What do you know about this ghost of Danny Darrel, and his black curse ?"

"No more than you—damn it ! I've tried to tell myself it was all poppycock—but I don't know. But who else would be bothering us—both our ranches ?"

"That's what I can't figure —except for those three masked riders who figured they had Linda—and me. As soon as this smallpox, and all, has run its course, I want to get a crew and ride into that sink-hole and find what it's all about."

Randal arose a little heavily to his feet.

"I'm with you," he agreed. "I wish we could do it now." He smiled a little queerly. "MacVeigh's getting along all right, eh ?"

"He'll soon be as good as ever."

"I was just thinking, that if Griggs had been in your place when I made that offer—I figure McVeigh would be in Boot Hill now. Griggs is a good medico—but I think he's got his price. Which is what I like about you, that you haven't."

Lance stood up.

"Then you'll try and meet MacVeigh half-way ?"

"It goes against the grain but if nothing happens—looks like the sensible thing to do."

There was that same qualification that MacVeigh himself had made, but under the circumstances Lance couldn't blame them. Randall insisted on his remaining for something to eat. Then the doctor headed for town again. He had ridden miles out of his way, and night was not far off. It had stopped snowing, but it was well below zero now, the everlasting wind still howled dismally, making the waning afternoon more bitter. A sense of weariness, of futility, gripped him. Whoever had named this Desolate Range had hit it aptly.

Somewhere a coyote howled. A jack-rabbit moved like a white ghost from one clump of sparse grass to

another. The grey pall which had shut away the sun for over a week was breaking now in fitful splashes, allowing the pale sky to show through, with a few faintly white stars and a thin slab of moon. This, coupled with the snow, made the evening quite light with a queer, ethereal quality.

Here was no brush. But here, again, Lance's horse shied and snorted. He reined it impatiently, quickened to attention. Sprawled on the ground ahead was something which the ever-drifting snow was trying to hide from the eyes of the world.

Lance needed no second glance to tell him what it was. Another man lying there, as though asleep. Faint hope stirred in him that this man overcome by cold or weariness, might have stretched out under the benign-seeming influence of the creeping cold to rest. A touch showed that he was not yet stiff, but it needed no glance at his face to tell the doctor that he, too, was dead.

And here, again, was a man that Lance knew, even if less pleasantly than in the case of Johnny Evarts. The man was Baldy, one of the three who had been responsible for the boulder in the road and the bear cub, which had sent his team and himself, along with Reese MacVeigh, off the dug road above the Big Muddy.

Lance examined him, puzzled. It almost looked as though his first suspicion might be right, that the Neckyoke puncher might have been overcome by cold and weariness and have frozen as he stopped to rest. And then, turning back the collar of his mackinaw, Lance saw with narrowing eyes that this, too, was another case of murder.

Wrapped about Baldy's neck, sunk deep into the flesh of his throat and caught in a grip which there had been no releasing, was a length of chain, one link of which had been roughly broken off from a longer piece.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GHOST.

THE Broken Chain! Certainly a deliberate effort had been made to convince whoever should find Baldy that he had been murdered by the Chain, just as that neckyoke beside Johnny Evarts had pointed an accusing finger towards the Neckyoke. It was a little too obvious, but hot-headed men would not be apt to stop and reason in the face of such discoveries.

Here, again, was something queer. There was no sign of a struggle, no mark of violence on Baldy. Yet the chain could not have been wrapped in such strangling fashion about his throat without a violent opposition on his part. Quite plainly, as in the case of Johnny, he had anticipated no danger from the man who had killed him.

But how it had been done, even then, was a mystery. Surely a man would fight while he was being throttled.

Lance unwrapped the chain with thoughtful fingers, but it held no additional clue. Just a length of broken, rather rusty chain. Even if it could be traced, that would prove nothing, for it might have been stolen.

Wearily, he climbed into the saddle, turned back toward the Neckyoke. The moon was shining unencumbered at last from a clear sky, the whole land was frosty-white and bitterly cold, though a breeze which seemed to sear and burn in its intensity still ruffled the snow into unending designs.

The bunkhouse was dark and silent. He found Dave Randall just getting ready for bed, but at sight of the doctor he held the door wide, inquiringly.

"More bad news, I suppose, to bring you back at this time of night," he commented, and his shoulders seemed to square a little. "Let's have it."

"Better get your boots on again," Lance advised. "We're taking a little ride. And bring your gun along."

Randall eyed him a moment, nodded.

"I always do," he said grimly. "Be with you in a minute."

Five minutes later, muffled against the cold, they rode away from the silent buildings, which seemed to crouch close against the earth and huddle together as though for warmth. The moon cast long shadows jerkily across the snow ahead of them, the frosty breaths of their horses rose up like steam. Not until the buildings had been left well behind did the cattleman speak again.

"What's it about this time?" he asked.

Lance fumbled in a pocket with a mittened hand, brought out the length of chain and allowed it to dangle.

"I found this to-night—wrapped around the neck of one of your men. Baldy. We're going back there now."

The veins in Randall's forehead seemed to swell a little as he looked at the chain, his voice was hoarse.

"Baldy?" he echoed. "But—but why the devil——"

"Your guess is as good as mine. And he hadn't put up any scrap."

Again there was silence, while these facts were digested. They came finally to the body, and Randall looked around, his keen eyes taking in such evidence as there was though again the drifting snow had nearly blotted out even the trail left by Lance.

"It begins to look as if you were right—two of them in one day ; one from each outfit," Randall admitted. "Though how anybody could get both of them, that way, I can't quite see. Anything," he added with grim humour, "short of a thing that wasn't flesh and blood."

"Have you ever seen the ghost of Danny Darrel ? " Lance asked.

" Who ? Me ? " Randall looked surprised. " No. Despite what I just said, there's no such thing, of course."

"I just wondered. MacVeigh, he claims to have seen it plain enough."

"If I could see it just once, I'd like to get it levelled over my sights," Randall growled. "This business would be settled then, or I'd find out why."

Dave Randall was a man of iron nerve. A murdered man lay at his feet, and even that, along with the talk of ghosts at this hour, affected him no more than the casual mention of cattle prices at midday. Even so, the next few moments were more than either of them had counted on.

A slight sound came from behind them, one hard to place. As Lance turned, his blood seemed to congeal, from something colder than the night itself. Off fifty paces was a small coulee, and in between was the white waste. Here, at the edge of the Neckyoke, where the Desolate really began, was as bleak a spot as could be found anywhere across the reaching miles. And in the middle of it, between them and the coulee, stood something.

At first glance it looked to be a man, but at second look it seemed to be no creature of flesh and blood, standing there, staring at them. The clothes were old—old with wear, with dirt of the years, threadbare garments, if garments they were, which fluttered in the icy breath which whispered across the wastes, though the thing they enclosed seemed unconscious of cold. They clung about that wraithlike figure, whose vacant face and staring eyes held the quality of something from beyond the grave.

It stood there, staring, making no move nor sound, then, slowly, dramatically, one arm lifted, pointed toward them, fell again, and a wild shriek of laughter rang upon the night, was gone almost as quickly as it had begun, leaving only the echo of it behind.

For a long moment Dave Randall stood as if frozen. Then, shakily, he moved.

" Danny Darrel ! " he gasped.

His own words seemed to break the spell which had gripped him. His face was white, but his nerve was steady as ever as he jerked off a mitten and his hand streaked for his holstered gun.

" Damn you, Danny Darrel, ghost or devil, this time I finish you ! " he roared, and flung the gun up.

With a jump, Lance was beside him, knocking the gun up as it belched flame. Randall was cursing him wildly, trying to bring it to bear again.

"Let be," he exclaimed. "He's gone. Why didn't you let me drill it, Doc ?"

" Don't be a fool " Lance rasped. "We've had enough killing here already."

"But he's killed Baldy—he's the black curse that dogs us all to death." Randall was almost frothing with rage as he started on a run for his horse. "Where the blazes could he have got to ? "

That was all a part and parcel with the rest. For a moment they had been grappling together, their attention distracted, and in that moment the figure on the snow had vanished as though it had never been there at all. Randall was trying to catch his horse, which snorted and veered away, reins dragging in the snow. He grabbed it, swung to the saddle, and Lance was up as well.

" That was Danny Darrel, then ? " he asked.

" Or his ghost," Randall agreed. "He looked about the same as when I saw him last, near a quarter of a century ago—and he was wearing the same clothes he had on then. I'd know them anywhere. But, blast it, man, he's been dead all these years ! "

He checked his horse to stare questioningly, almost accusingly, at the doctor. Here was something too far beyond the ordinary ken, and his mind recoiled as he recited the facts. He swung around to stare at the barren, wintry landscape.

" Off there," said Lance suddenly. "He rides a horse, whatever else he does, it seems."

Randall was already spurring.

"We'll get him," he said.

"We'll have a try at it," Lance agreed. "But not with guns."

Randall looked at him queerly, nodded.

"Just as you say," he agreed. "If you're game to try it with bare hands, I can do the same."

Randall did not appear to notice, as they rode, that at the start there had been not one, but two trails in the snow.

Which meant that there had been two men, or ghosts, watching them there. The second had been careful to keep out of sight, probably back in the coulee, sending the ghost of Danny Darrel forward to attract their attention, to run all the risk.

And when the ghost had reached a horse and fled wildly, the other figure had done the same—heading, from the line of tracks, off at right-angles, but getting out of sight before either of them had seen at all. Ghosts on horseback! It wasn't a particularly new idea, perhaps, but it held far-reaching possibilities. Also, that second line of tracks would be whipped away by the wind long before they could hope to return and take up the trail.

There was no help for it, however. Anxious as Lance was to have a look at that second rider, it seemed more imperative to follow the ghostly figure who rode ahead. A man who looked like Danny Darrel, who wore the clothes of a man long dead! A ghost, or a man—whatever he was, there was something here not only strange but sinister.

It looked like a long chase. The horseman ahead rode as though born to the saddle, and he was trying desperately to escape. Randall grunted.

"Looks like he knew this country pretty well," he said.

Lance rode with one eye cocked for that second horseman, but there was no sign of him. Randall was spurring,

intent on shortening the distance. He barked out a sudden order.

"Swing to the left, Doc."

Lance complied. A minute later he saw Randall's strategy. Knowing the exact lay of the land, he had seen that, coming from behind himself, the horseman up ahead would be forced to swing, and Lance was now in a position to gain ground.

Such a chase could not long continue. It was too cold, with too much snow on the ground. Flesh could not stand the pace. Ahead was a low cluster of hills, covered partially with stunted brush. The ghost had been heading for such scanty shelter as they afforded, but he would not be able to reach them ahead of their pursuit. Already his horse was stumbling a little, slowing.

"Got him," Randall chuckled grimly. "I——"

From somewhere at the side, off in those hills, a rifle shot rang loud on the night. The ghost seemed to pitch and lurch in the saddle. Then to crumple and to slide out of it and on the ground, landing in a sprawled heap while his cayuse continued to run in wild terror.

CHAPTER XVII

RANDALL'S SON

THAT bullet had zoomed for half a mile across the wastes, and to try and find the hidden gunman would be almost hopeless, as well as inviting more of the same from ambush. To have a look at the ghost might mean being made a target as well, but neither Lance nor Randall were in the mood to worry about that. They swung off their horses, and Lance half-raised the prostrate figure in his arms.

A quick look satisfied him that the man (for, seen at close range and lifted, he was certainly no ghost), was still alive. But when that much was said, there was little left. The bullet had creased his scalp, making a nasty wound which was bleeding freely. In addition, the smash of the lead had done things to the skull, coming dangerously close to the brain.

How bad it was he could not tell from such a hasty examination. But one thing was grimly clear; that bullet had been aimed to kill, and it had been fired by a rifleman who did not need to take a back seat for anyone. Another inch to the side would have been enough.

Already Lance was at work, snapping a quick order to Randall to untie his little black bag and bring it from behind the saddle. Dave Randall obeyed. Lance worked swiftly despite the numbing cold, paused for a moment to frown.

"There's something funny here," he said. "Mighty funny."

He resumed his work thoughtfully, using a handful of snow partly melted in his hand, to swab off the excess blood and partly clean the face. It nearly froze his bare hands to work but he contrived a bandage, which would stop the flow of blood, and drew on his mittens again.

"We'll have to get him to the house," he said. "Lift him up in front of me, will you, and I'll carry him as carefully as I can manage."

"He's no ghost, anyway," Randall grunted. He stared curiously for a moment at the bloody, strange face in his arms, lifted the man like a child.

"Thin as the devil. Skin and bones, as though he'd been half starved. Looks more like a ghost than ever—but not so much like Danny Darrel."

They rode in silence again, each busy with his own thoughts. Lance had noted one thing. This man, whose laughter had been so wild and crazy, did not carry a gun, either visible or hidden. And he was suffering considerably from frostbite as well as other things, his

face almost to the point of emaciation. There were other things that were decidedly queer, but it would take a more complete examination to tell about them.

Lance wrapped his burden in his own heavy coat as well as he could. It was some three miles to the ranch-house, and speed was desperately needed on such a night, yet to ride too fast might well jolt out the last flicker of life which burned so low already in this man. And, mostly on a hunch, Lance had an increasing conviction that he wanted this ghost of Danny Darrel kept alive.

Randall propounded a question.

"Looked to me like there was two of 'em, back there. Or didn't you notice ?"

So the keen-eyed cattleman had seen that extra trail as well. Lance nodded.

"Looked so to me."

"Yeah. And in that case, the hombre that shot this ghost must have been the one who was with him then."

"Looks so."

"Well, but why ? They must have been working together, back there. And then his own partner shoots him, tries to murder him. Why shoot at his own side-kick ? He could have had a good try at stopping us."

The same thought had been plaguing Lance. It didn't make sense—but it was all of a pattern with this whole eerie proposition that they were up against. Was this man one of the masked riders, and was the killer another of the gang ? But speculation was idle.

The miles seemed endless, but finally the low huddle of the buildings was ahead. Randall sighed in audible relief, swung down as they drew up before the house, and reached up long arms.

"I'll take him," he said. "You open the door."

Inside it was still warm, though the fire in the heater had burned low. Randall laid the wounded man on a couch, struck a light, and turned his attention to the stove.

"I'll put the horses in the barn, then be right back, Doc," he promised.

Lance nodded. Already he was at work, with a basin of water heating on the stove. The wound was no better nor worse than it had been at first, the bandage had checked most of the bleeding—externally, at any rate.

For a few minutes he had to devote himself to the frostbite, which was bad. It could be checked now by prompt measures so that the final effect probably would not be serious, but that had to be done. By the time the room was warm again and that attended to, Randall had returned.

"Tell me what to do, Doc, and I'll have a try at it," he offered, chuckling mirthlessly. "Never thought I'd be nursin' a ghost."

"Looks to me like we've got a bad night ahead of us, Randall," Lance nodded. "I'm afraid there are broken particles of skull and bone, that have to be attended to if he's to have a chance to live. That means an operation, here to-night. And about as delicate a one as I've ever tried to perform."

He held up his hands, looked at them a moment, almost curiously. Those were the hands which, a few weeks ago, he had figured were forever finished for such tasks as this. And yet, tonight, under these unfavourable conditions, he must try again. There could be no waiting for another day.

"Get another lamp or so, if you have them handy," he added. "We'll need the best light we can get."

"Got plenty of kerosene, and three-four lamps," Randall agreed. He went to see to it, and Lance went ahead with his examination. As in that first hasty one out in the open, he was puzzled by something here far out of the ordinary. Cutting away some of the hair, he began to understand what it was.

"His hair has been dyed a different colour," he said. "Kind of black. And it has been more of a red before

that.''

''Black, eh ? '' Randall, from one corner of the room, glanced incuriously over and went on, awkwardly polishing a lamp chimney. ''Danny Darrel had black hair.''

''And these are really the clothes he used to wear, eh ? ''

Randall came up for a closer look. Certainly the clothes were old, of a pattern and cut nearly a quarter of a century outmoded, dirty, patched and threadbare.

''Not a question of that,'' he agreed. ''See that green and yellow stripe in the cloth? I'll never forget that suit. And with black hair and that look on his face—he looked ghostly enough, and a lot like Danny Darrel used to, all right.''

Lance's pulse was beating with an unwonted excitement. He wished he could say as much for that of his patient. It was terribly weak—a little more so and it would cease to beat at all. And he had a growing conviction that he wished this man to live. He began to swab the face clean again, noting the bony outline of it. Part of that might be due to sickness, and this man, obviously, had been ill, not so long before. Another part could come from that wild, insane light that had shone in the eyes. But a part was certainly due to near-starvation and hardship.

''Darrel's face was thin and bony, was it ? ''

''Sure was. He was a runt, always looked like a walking skeleton. You couldn't fatten him up.''

''And this poor devil has been deliberately starved to make him look that way,'' Lance said. ''There's been some make-up smeared on his face, too, by somebody that knew how to do his stuff, and who knew what Danny Darrel used to look like. He——''

Lance stopped speaking, staring. The last of the make-up had been washed away, along with the blood. Under it, now, was a face drained of colour, but with something hauntingly familiar about it, though Lance

knew that he had never seen it before.

"Red hair—" he muttered. "Randall, come here and take a look at him! And keep a grip on yourself."

Randall turned, still polishing the lamp chimney with a piece of rag he had found. He stared for a moment, started forward, and the chimney suddenly splintered on the floor, a hoarse gasp came from the cattleman.

"Sam!" he exclaimed. "My God, Prescott, it's Sam! My son!"

CHAPTER XVIII

KIDNAPPED

THE doctor had suspected the truth before. That red-gold hair at the base was very like Linda's hair, and the similarity of features between Sam and his father and sister was still hauntingly familiar, despite the thinness of his face.

It was a shock to Lance, and doubly so to Dave Randall. Already the doctor was beginning to understand some of the events of the night. The bullet which had struck down Sam Randall was no longer a mystery.

So long as he had stood a chance of escaping from them, he might still be of some use to the mummer who had been using him for purposes of haunting and tormenting Dave Randall and Reese MacVeigh. But if he had been captured by them, even a man apparently insane, he would still be alive, and less able to torture his father than if found dead, just in the moment of reunion.

Because of that, the other man had shot him deliberately. Just as, earlier in the evening, he had thrust Sam forward to play the ghost, at the scene of

Baldy's murder, in the hope that Dave Randall would take a shot at his own son—as he had so nearly done, even with Lance's intervention.

Something of the same thought was in Randall's mind now. He turned a face beaded with sweat towards the doctor.

"My God, Prescott, I'd have murdered my own son to-night—if you hadn't stopped me!"

"Looks like that was what was planned on," Lance nodded grimly. "But that little trick misfired."

"Thanks to you. You've talked ghosts and curses, but kept your head level. But—how is he? He looks like he was about finished right now."

"He's still alive," Lance said carefully. "I've got to operate right away. It's his only chance. And it's none too good a chance, I'm afraid. But there is a chance."

Randall's face was haggard, but his voice was steady. "I know you'll do your best, Doc. And I'll help all I can."

"We might as well get at it, then," Lance suggested. "Got another lamp chimney?"

"Plenty of them." Randall went to the kitchen and returned with a new one. "I'm not in the habit of going to pieces that way—but after you've believed for half a year that your son was dead, and then you find him this way——"

He stopped for a moment, swallowed audibly, and again his eyes were begging like those of a whipped dog as he looked at the doctor.

"That laugh of his—the way he acted, sure sounded crazy," he added. "And he must have been, otherwise he'd never have stayed away from home all this time, nor acted that way. If he should get over this gun-shot——"

"If he gets well, we'll have to see then," Lance replied. It was scant comfort, but this was a time for truth. "He might be all right again, after this, or he might not.

That's one thing that we'll just have to wait and see about.''

''I put on a pot of coffee, a while back, in the kitchen,'' Randall added, with an effort. ''Guess it's ready. You'd better have some, and a bite to eat first.''

''Thanks,'' Lance accepted gratefully. ''It will help.'' He sank into a chair, ate and drank hungrily. He was conscious of an overwhelming fatigue, akin to that which he had felt on the night when he had operated so disastrously down in Rimrock. He shook his head impatiently. There had been something funny about that, mighty funny. There'd be no funny business here to-night.

He stood up. The coffee had stimulated him, left him clear-minded and cool again. For the next hour there was little sound in the room. Dave Randall, despite the strain under which he laboured, was cool and efficient, marvelling a little at the sureness of the doctor. Immersed in the operation, Lance Prescott seemed to have the mechanical sureness of a machine, to become utterly impersonal as he did what had to be done.

It was over with finally. Sam Randall was alive, resting more easily. What the final outcome would be, only time could tell. Lance had done all that he could. Whether it was enough, or not, was up to the Great Healer.

He stood for a moment, staring down. Washed of colour, tired and helpless as it was, the face of Sam reminded him more than ever of Linda's. He ought to be getting back to town.

''You're not going a step till you've had some sleep,'' Dave Randall ordered, when he suggested it. ''There's a bed in the next room. Tumble in. You've done three men's work already to-day, and you've got to rest.''

Lance gave in. It was bitterly cold outside, with a wind still blowing like a baffled giant against the house, drifting snow rattling like sleet on the window panes and frost coating them heavily inside. In his lowered state of resistance, he would be apt to fall asleep in the saddle

and freeze as he rode.

A few hours' sleep and another meal helped a lot. Morning brought little change, either in his patient or the weather. Not that he had expected any. It would take a lot of patient recuperation on the part of nature before Sam would awaken again. Only the latent vitality of the man had pulled him through this far. Certainly, from all indications, the last months, since his disappearance, had been desperate ones for him.

The other patients at the Neckyoke were better, however. Ape Narcross, who had seemed really sick the day before, had made a big change for the better, and was sufficiently improved so that he was calling for his clothes, insisting that he be allowed to get up. He snarled at the doctor's refusal, glowering.

"Reckon that other sawbones'd let me up, and he's the one that's brought me around, anyway," he growled. "He knows something' about doctorin'."

"Yeah, he's been feedin' you sugar pills to make you think he's done something for you," Randall nodded. "Looks like you're on the mend, all right. Better make the most of it, while you can stay on the sick list. It ain't very nice weather for travellin', outside."

"Travellin'?" Ape echoed.

"Travelling," Randall's nod was grim. "Since you were sick, Ape, I've let you stay—I'd do the same with a yellow dog. But once you're well again, you'll be heading for some new range. That last trick or so of yours was considerable past the limit."

"And that's the thanks I get for doing yore dirty work ! " Ape sneered. "All right, I'll travel, when I can get up."

But he sank back, scowling darkly, with no further insistence on getting up. Lance swung into the saddle, headed for Windspur.

He should be feeling good, he knew. He had won a big victory—several big victories, since coming to Desolate Range. In the eyes of the world, his biggest

success would lie in breaking the back of the smallpox epidemic. A thing like that could be a terrible scourge, but he had tamed it. There was no longer any doubt that the worst was over, that conditions would rapidly be getting back to normal so far as the health of the country was concerned. And that, he knew, was due mostly to his own efforts, to the heroic treatment he had given.

From being a failure, a hunted fugitive, he was a man again, established in a good practice and well liked. He had saved the life of Sam Randall last night. Which would put Dave Randall solidly on his side, as well as Reese MacVeigh.

But somehow he couldn't feel elated. Those masked killers still stalked the range, as he had been afforded abundant proof only the day before. The ghost of Danny Darrel might be quelled in so far as Sam Randall was concerned, but the real curse of that long-dead day still reached out bony fingers which could drag other men down to death.

And, on the personal side, his past was apt to catch up with him at any time. The arrival of Doc Griggs was proof enough that he wasn't so far removed from Rimrock but that others, too, might come here, and with them the story of what had happened there, the law which had been cheated back at Rimrock.

So far as he was concerned, he was not inclined to trust Doc Griggs very far. In Rimrock, Griggs had been an enemy. Here he was friendly enough, and working hard and efficiently in combating the wave of sickness which had swept across the range. But, once that job was done, what then ?

Normally there was only enough work here to afford a good living for one doctor. Griggs might decide that he wanted the practice, and if he did——

Lance shook his head. No use in borrowing trouble. There was plenty here already. But somehow he couldn't think of anything else to-day. The black curse of the Prescotts—the same black curse that Danny Darrel had

put upon the Randalls and the MacVeighs. How could a man do such a thing? But the bleak facts of the stretching, strangling years could not be disputed.

The road to-day was deserted, which was not to be wondered at. Stretches of it were swept almost bare of snow by the whipping wind, and here his horse's hoofs rang sharp on the frozen ground. Again there were stretches where drifts had piled so deeply that it was all but impassable, the cayuse floundering through as though walking on stilts. It was close to noon when he came to town.

Riding ghostily down the street, with snow from a fresh storm obscuring vision, it seemed to him as though Windspur was almost deserted. The sense that something was wrong, which had been with him all during the day increased as he neared his office. He started up the outer stairs, stopped as the door opened and Casey appeared, bald head uncovered, his good eye anxious.

"Golly, Doc, yuh back?" he gasped. "I been keepin' my eye peeled for yuh."

"I'm back," Lance agreed. "What's wrong?"

For a moment the bartender goggled, seeming to be at a loss. Then he blurted the bad news out in one breath.

"It's Linda—Miss Randall. She's gone. Some masked hombres busted in and kidnapped her, just as it was startin' tuh get daylight."

CHAPTER XIX

TRAPPED

THAT statement, it seemed, compassed all the facts. The town had been asleep, the alarm slow in being raised when the raiders had struck. One of the patients

had finally succeeded in attracting the attention of Casey as he came to open up the saloon, had recounted what he had seen. Casey had been quick to spread the alarm then.

Thoroughly aroused, the town had been swift to act. A posse had been formed, and they had found the trail leading off towards the south-west, the signs of it almost swept away already by the storm and wind. Within a mile they had lost it completely, but they had continued to search. So far, there was nothing to report.

The town was seething with excitement. None of them knew of Linda's previous experience, for Lance and Randall had said nothing about it. But this thing of kidnapping a woman was beyond the pale. So far as men were concerned, they might fight as they pleased and little was thought of it. But to molest a woman was something else again.

It was a feeling of helplessness, of impotency, that gripped the town now. The raiders had disappeared somewhere into the wastes of Desolate Range, but in such weather as this it was like looking for a jack-rabbit where only his track had been. There was just one bright spot in all of it, as the public viewed it. Linda was the daughter of Dave Randall, so her abduction must be connected with the feud between the Neckyoke and the Broken Chain.

That the Broken Chain would resort to such tactics was hard to believe, except that the thing seemed to have happened. Lance's jaw set a little harder as he listened to the gossip. This would make an already tough situation that much worse. And he knew well enough that the Chain and Reese MacVeigh had nothing to do with it.

"Thanks Casey," he said, having drawn such facts as he could from the shivering bartender. "I'll step up and see how my patients are getting along, then I'll be downstairs. Send word to the other saloons, will yuh? Tell them I've got something to tell about all this."

"I'll do it," Casey agreed. "I guess the rest of yore sick folks are all right. Mis' Tripp come in as soon as she heard the news, and is lookin' after them now. Takin' good care of 'em, too."

That was good news, and the doctor breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Tripp was a tall, angular lady, with elbows jutting like knitting needles, and an uncompromising sense of right and wrong which even twenty years of Desolate Range had not been able to shake, as well as a tongue bitter as acid. To-day, however, her face was strangely troubled.

"I come up here to do what I could, Doctor, just as soon as I heard about that poor lamb," she exclaimed. "I felt it my Christian duty, and here I'll stay till she returns—or till I'm not needed. Though if I could get my hands on the swine that dared molest a girl like her——"

She squared her elbows, the light of battle snapping from her eyes.

"I'd just like to see them try and kidnap *me*," she went on. "I've got a hat-pin here—and they'd have to step lively now I promise you ! I just wish they *would* try it ! "

"I'm sure that you'd give them more than they bargained for, Mrs. Tripp," Lance agreed. "Everybody seems to be doing finely, thanks to your care. And I'll be deeply indebted to you if you will remain and look after them."

"I'll do that, though as to a debt—fiddlesticks ! But I'm worried about that poor child ! And these men in this town are all lost already, without a notion in their heads of what to do—not that that's surprising any. Men, for the most part, are the most helpless, gin-swizzling creatures, lost and worthless without a woman—I sometimes wonder why the Good Lord made 'em in the first place ! "

"You said a mouthful, Mrs. Tripp," Lance agreed. "Look after things, then. I expect to be gone—perhaps

for a couple of days.''

''You're going after Linda,'' Mrs. Tripp observed shrewdly. ''And I almost believe that you have some idea of where you're going, too.''

'' I almost believe I have, Mrs. Tripp. At least, I hope so.''

''If there was more men like you in this God-forsaken country, I could almost understand why He created the creatures in the first place,'' Mrs. Tripp observed, and dabbed furtively at her eyes as he went outside again. ''My land, what am I getting sentimental about? Likely he don't know any more than the rest of them.''

Below, Casey had done his work well. The saloon was nearly filled with grim, expectant men, many of whom had returned not long since from the fruitless foray which had begun with the dawn. Their report was brief. The trail had been completely blotted away by the blizzard. Some, more hopeful or more determined, were still trying to follow it, but that seemed hopeless. Casey plucked at Lance's sleeve.

''Give 'em somethin' good, Doc,'' he urged. ''A lot of these other saloon keepers are going tuh be sore, if yuh don't—my sendin' out tuh bring all their customers here. Ordinary, it ain't ethical nor quite right. For a day like this, a man likes a jolt of somethin' hot now an' then.''

''I'll give them something,'' Lance promised. He said. ''And I appreciate it. I've heard of these masked riders before—in fact, I had a little brush with three of them, not so long back. I kept quiet about it—this range was about half scared to death about smallpox, along with other things. First off, though, I want you all to get one thing straight. I know mighty well that the Broken Chain has nothing to do with this. Reese MacVeigh doesn't make war on women, any more than Dave Randall does.''

Silence greeted his words. What he had said about the masked riders interested them, but they were waiting

to be shown. They trusted him in part. Not wholly. Lance realized that the black cloud of distrust had settled so deeply across the desolate country that nobody quite trusted anyone else now.

"I think that I know where they're headed for—and it'll be north, not south," he went on. "I'm going up that way to have a look. It won't be any picnic, and it's apt to be dangerous. I'd like to have about ten men ride with me."

Still in that grim, unsmiling silence, it seemed that the whole room stepped forward a couple of paces.

"We're all ready to go, Doc—tuh hell if necessary, whenever yuh say the word."

Lance smiled briefly.

"That's fine boys. But I only want ten. That ought to be enough. Probably more than enough. And it may be a good idea to have a few stay here in town, to keep watch that something of the sort doesn't happen again. Also, I know that all of you have plenty of work on the range that needs doing, t' ese days."

They accepted his leadership without question. A quarter of an hour later, with Lance mounted now on the great horse Frosty, they rode out of town, heading towards the sink-hole.

Even then, a torturing uncertainty rode with Lance. The sink-hole, everything considered, was the logical place to look, but it was entirely possible that Linda would not have been taken there. If he only knew what brain was back of all this devilry—what its motive might be and its further plan, that would help a lot.

He had only one thing to go on. It was all directed, jointly, these things that had been happening, against the three families who had come under the curse of Danny Darrel. The Randalls, the MacVeighs, and himself, as the last of the Prescotts. A dead man's curse, remaining active, growing more malignant with the passing of the years. It was fantastic, incredible, and beyond the slightest possibility of doubt.

They had ridden for a couple of hours when a shadowy figure emerged from the bleakness to join them. It was Dave Randall, his face a little more haggard, grimmer than ever. Seeing him, the others made place for him without demur. Many of them had little use for the boss of the Neckyoke—at least two of the ten were Broken Chain punchers—but it was Randall's daughter who was gone to-day.

"I just heard about it," Randall said heavily. "You seem to have an idea, Doc. I've sort of the same one, I guess. So I'm ridin' with you."

"How's Sam ? " Lance asked.

"No change that I can see."

"That's fine, at least. Mighty encouraging." Lance made his voice hearty, for to-day Dave Randall needed all the cheer he could give him. "I guess I'd better tell you fellows what happened a couple of weeks or so back. I told Dave at the time. Then you'll have a little better idea what we're riding in to. How many of you have seen the Sink-Hole ? The Forbidden Country ? "

Surprisingly few had seen it, even from a distance. There was nothing to draw men there, plenty to keep them away. None had been interested in exploring that barren bleakness.

"That what the Injuns call the Place of the Evil Spirits, ain't it ? " one man asked uneasily.

"The same. That's where we're going."

For a moment there was silence. The same man shrugged, grinned wryly.

"Doc, if yuh head straight for hell, I'll do my best tuh bring up the rear—mebby it'll be a long way back, but I'll keep comin'. After livin' in this country long as I have, there can't be much diff'rence, anyway."

Briefly then, Lance told of finding Linda there on the occasion of her previous disappearance, the gates which opened only the one way for those who did not know their secret, the coming of the masked riders and their subsequent escape from them.

"Whether Linda has been taken there again, or not, is just a guess, of course," he added. "But I have an idea that we'll find something there, at least. When we get there, half of us are going in. We may have a fight on our hands—that remains to be seen. The other half of you are to stay outside till we signal you. That way, we can get those gates open again, find a way to block them open if necessary. And if anybody shows up while we're inside, you can fight them off. Got it?"

They had. It seemed like a good scheme, though everyone was wondering, by now, who these masked riders could be, what their purpose in doing this. Lance shrugged. He had had several headaches in the past weeks, trying to figure out the same thing. Once they arrived, if they found any of the masquers he intended to have an answer.

It was dusk again, with the early darkness closing in, when they came in sight of the sink-hole. The storm had stopped, but the clouds still lowered, and it was already too dark down in there to see anything. The place might be inhabited to-night, or it might not.

He led his men to the winding, twisting route which was the one way in or out, rode in silence for a while, then halted.

"This is as far as some of you go—now. Keep your eyes open, so you'll know it later. You can go back to the entrance, and—keep on keeping your eyes open!"

With Randall and five others, he rode ahead. Lance glanced back in time to see that the gates had closed behind them, as, somewhere ahead, he caught the gleam of a fire. Someone was here—and if this Intelligence who directed the whole thing was up to standard, likely they'd be expected.

CHAPTER XX

THE INFLUENCE OF HASHISH

If they were expected, those men left on guard outside were an ace in the hole. But it was no part of Lance's programme to depend on them to pull the rest of them out of a hole after they had tumbled in. Far better to keep from falling in in the first place. That outside crew would be useful chiefly to open the gate when they were ready to leave. Until then——

He could sense, as much as see, that the others rode now with drawn guns, bare hand and weapon thrust deep into the pockets of their heavy sheepskins, ready for instant action. The cold was a stinging, biting thing, which seemed to have dropped down into the sink-hole and to be throttling it in a desperate grip.

Here the snow lay deep, unstirred by wind, with now and then a track running through it, proof that men were here. Ahead, the light glowed brighter, over by the cavern. Someone had brought in plenty of fuel since Lance's visit.

"I'll ride up, and two of you with me," Lance said swiftly. "Dave, you and the other boys wait back here—and watch sharp!"

"We're watchin'," Randall nodded grimly. "Go ahead."

The settling night, the deep gloom of this pit-like place, the biting cold, had all been in their favour. They were nearly to the fire before someone moved, and Lance had a fleeting glimpse of a running figure, unmasked. But the light was too poor for recognition, a moment later there were masked figures around the fire, rising up like blaze-tenders of the infernal regions. A voice, cool, unhurried, which he recognized as that of the man who had been leader here on his other visit, came out of the

gloom.

"Better drop yore guns, Doc, and elevate! There's six guns on yuh, and if we need to shoot, we'll do it. Likewise, we'll shoot to hurt."

"If you start the fireworks, look out for a double finish," Lance warned. "We've got you covered as well."

For a dragging moment, there was silence. The others could see that this was true. Then the masker laughed a little.

"Figgered tuh catch us nappin', didn't yuh, Doc? And come damn close to doing it. But, much as I hate tuh disappoint yuh, yuh're covered from behind—there's a man on either side of you. And seein' that you can't see them, but are outlined against the fire, as right nice targets, why, it'd be the point of common sense to do as I say. Speak up, boys, so's he won't be belittlin' my word."

"Reckon they won't be speakin' up—not now." That was Dave Randall's voice, and at the sound of it, the masked figures seemed to stiffen a little. "We've got them both right here, only we sort of knocked 'em over the head, which'll keep 'em from chippin' for a spell. Now, drop your guns–or we'll shoot. You're covered double."

Again there was a little pause. Somewhere high overhead, around the edges of the sink, the wind moved with a mournful wail. That was the worst of this desolate country—the wind never seemed still, no matter how bitter the cold. It was like a lost soul in torment, always seeking rest and unable to find it. Down in here it did not stir, but its pulsating breath could still be felt in the very shivering of the air. On that silence Randall's voice crackled again.

"Drop those guns—now!"

Lance saw them falling, hands being raised, jerking up like mechanical arms on tin soldiers. And in that moment, battle was about them like the sudden breaking loose of storm.

It came from the rear in a sweeping attack that caught them all completely by surprise. A snowball, with a rock embedded in it, caught Lance on the arm, numbing it for the moment, sending his own half-drawn gun tumbling into the snow. Guns crackled spitefully, a lariat rope hissed through the air, hurtling figures were upon them. And then it was over with, almost as quickly as it had begun, as the maskers who had been about to surrender hurled themselves upon the posse.

Arms jerked behind his back and tied there, Lance found himself in similar state with those who had ridden with him. One of their number was dead, but that seemed the extent of the injuries. Several new maskers pushed forward, more wood was thrown on the dying blaze, and as it leaped high, he saw more prisoners—the men whom they had left on guard, outside the gate.

"Looks like we wasn't worth a damn tuh keep watch, Doc," one of them explained apologetically at sight of Lance. "But we heard these other hombres comin', and just as we was gettin' set for them, Chisholm throws a gun on us from behind—the dirty traitor ! But one of yuh downed him in here, which helps."

So that was the way of it. One of the ten who had ridden with them was a traitor. And, grimly sardonic jest of fate, he was the man who had been killed in the brief fight in here.

The surprise had been complete, since having cleaned out the sink-hole and with guards outside, neither Randall nor himself had looked for further trouble.

They were, he saw, about equal in numbers now, posse and maskers, but every one of the posse was tied and helpless. It was plain from the start that the man who had been acting as leader was not the chief. Though there was no outward mark to designate the chief, yet his attitude of command, the way the others obeyed his orders, showed that he had at last arrived.

He came forward now, a mask covering his face completely beneath a fur cap, shapeless in a heavy coat, and

Lance had the feeling that he was smiling beneath the mask, that but for the heavy mittens he would be rubbing his hands together.

"Ah," he breathed. "It seems we have visitors to-night. Well, that is most fortunate. For to-night the black gods are hungry—and thirsty."

Again, despite the hiding masks, it seemed to Lance as though something like a shiver ran through the ranks of the other maskers. Dave Randall, who had been standing like a man in a dream, dazed from a vicious gun-swipe from behind, straightened defiantly.

"I'd like to have one good look at your face, hombre," he growled.

"What you would like, Dave Randall, and what you will get—those are two very different things. You came here, you know, uninvited. Now that you are here, you must pay the price of curiosity. If it is any satisfaction to you to know it, what is coming has been long overdue."

Lance stared at the man, conscious of a faint stirring of something familiar. Who was he ? Somewhere, some time, he had heard that voice, but in this setting, booming out from behind the mask, he could not place it. But he was confident that here was the real leader at last, the man who, for purposes of his own, had picked up the old curse and turned it to his own ends.

Randall shrugged.

"I can take what comes my way," he said, and there was no conceit in the words. "But where's my girl? What have you done to her?" His eyes were questing anxiously into the depths of the cavern, beyond the glow of the firelight.

"Your girl ? Linda ? " The voice seemed to purr, like that of a cat holding a mouse between it spaws, waiting the moment for a quick finishing stroke. "Linda is back in Windspur, in her own quarters again. Nothing has been done to harm her. It was not necessary. Is not she, too, under the curse ? All that is necessary now

is to leave it to work, as it is doing—for nature to take its own course.''

There was something weird and grim about the words, common as they were. A hidden threat chilled more sharply than the arctic air. Randall's voice was hoarse.

''What do you mean, damn you? How is she? What——''

There was no answer forthcoming to that, no way of forcing one. The taunt had been intended to add fuel to the worry already burning in the hearts of Randall and Lance, and it had served its purpose.

Now, casually almost, the leader crossed to the fire, pulled off his mittens and warmed his hands there for a moment. Lance eyed them sharply. Hands could tell a lot.

But not those hands. It was clear that, with the same diabolical cunning that seemed to characterize all his movements, the chief had foreseen that possibility. His hands were dirty—smeared, apparently, with charcoal, to the point where they looked vague and formless. Casually he reached into an inner pocket of his coat, drew out a packet of cigarettes.

''You boys have done some good work to-night,'' he said, and again that ominous purr was in the undertone. ''You deserve a smoke. Take one, each of you, and light up.''

Most of his masked crew stepped forward without demur, accepted the fags and thrust them between slits in the masks into their mouths, lit them. Only one demurred.

''Thanks. Only me—I don't care much about smokin', anyway.''

'' Did I ask you if you cared about it? I said for each of you to take one—and smoke it.''

There was a long moment of silence, a clash of wills. The figure of the masked chief had grown still, while he waited. That heavy coat would cover almost anything. The voice of the other man, who had been in charge until

the coming of the chief, came quietly.

"Better light up, fella. It's what you're paid for."

"Oh, all right." Shrugging, the recalcitrant one obeyed. The chief returned the almost emptied packet to his pocket, glanced around with eyes that seemed to gleam through the slits.

"The black gods are hungry to-night," he repeated.

Again that shiver, half of expectancy, half of dread, seemed to run through the gathering. But now there was a subtle change which had not been there a few minutes before, more cigarettes were accepted eagerly. There was a growing excitement and eagerness. Lance caught a whiff of the smoke, and suddenly he began to understand.

This fellow was clever—fiendishly so. Those cigarettes contained no ordinary tobacco. They were filled instead with Marijuana weed—hashish, the dread stuff which, until the effect wore off, was as effective a router of reason as could be found. Its effect on different people varied, even as the effect on the same people might vary at different times. But for the next few hours, Lance knew, they would be surrounded by a group of virtual madmen, their minds so wildly intoxicated as to be open to any suggestion, no matter how insane, ready for any excess.

"This is the place of the black gods," the chief repeated. He was not smoking himself. His mind was clear enough, but imbued with the fantastic, with grim intention from the beginning. "To-night, as others did here in the old days, we must sacrifice to them."

This time there was a response. One of the masquers stepped forward, giving a hitch to his gun-belt.

"Yeah, that's the ticket," he agreed. His hand darted, a knife gleamed in the firelight. "Want I should do a bit of carvin'? I'm pretty good with this."

"No. Not yet. Later, you may use your knife. But first the victim must be sacrificed on the altar yonder. Some of you clean it off, that it may be ready."

Another yell went up. Crazed, this crew was ready for

anything. Not for nothing was hashish the chosen smoke of the order of the Assassins, who had flourished in Persia a thousand years before.

Two or three started on a run for the big boulder, used as a bloody altar in pagan days. Lance had a glimpse of Randall's face, tight-lipped and grim. Some of the others looked a little sick, as understanding came to them.

"We have two here who are both over-ripe for the sacrifice," the chief went on, pointing to Randall and Lance. "Which shall it be ? "

"Both of them," someone howled.

The masked head shook slowly.

"No. Only one of them to-night. One shall die. But we must do it to please the black gods. Besides, there is no hurry."

" Aim to murder us, do you ? " Randall demanded. "Haven't got the guts to fight it out, man to man."

"Sacrifice is not murder. Besides, Dave Randall, you are long overdue to die. It is now nearly a quarter of a century since death has been ready for you—and all these years you have cheated it."

Despite the cold, beads of sweat glistened briefly on Randall's face. With Sam Randall at home, still unconscious after his operation, and Linda in some unknown peril. Dave Randall was in no mood for death now. But his voice was steady enough.

"So far as that curse of Danny Darrel is concerned, I'd have welcomed death a good many times. If that's what you have in mind, get it over with. I reckon Doc, here, is needed a lot worse in this community than I am."

"But you forget that Doc is a Prescott, and so under the curse. And after to-night, he cannot go back, of course. However, since you seem to want your turn first, I've no objection." He became suddenly brisk. "Is the altar of sacrifice ready ?"

"All ready, chief."

Any hesitancy or dread on the part of the crew had vanished. Lance had an idea that this thing had been

suggested to them in the past, while they were under the influence of the hashish, by way of preparation, but that they had never actually participated in such an orgy. As sane men, they had shrunk from the idea. But now they were ready for anything.

"Very well. Bring the axe."

A couple of them disappeared back in the cave again, and a new, wild yell went up as they returned, one of them carrying a huge, double-bitted axe which gleamed like crimson in the fireglow. The chief took it, ran his thumb along one of the blades. The experienced eye of the surgeon could see that it was almost razor-sharp.

"It is good." Casually almost, the ghoulish masker slung the axe over his shoulder. "Take him on to the altar and fasten him there."

Almost in a mob now, seething with eagerness, they rushed Dave Randall, hustled him unceremoniously towards that dark and bloody rock.

CHAPTER XXI

THE TABLES TURNED.

It was now or never. Lance had been watching, tensely alert. For the moment, all attention was centred on Dave Randall, all caution gone under the exhilarating influence of the weed. The chief was watching them, his back to Lance, himself carried away for the moment in the black thing he planned on doing. The axe was over his shoulder, the blade hanging down behind him.

Lance moved fast. His hands were tied behind his back, but he could still raise them. And that blade, as he had seen, was whetted almost to a razor edge. Before

anyone had seen him or guessed his purpose, he had backed up to it, felt the blade against the rope. He worked swiftly, pressing hard, knowing that the man who held the axe would feel it almost at once.

But the rope, wound several times around his wrists, was small and taut. The one quick up-and-down stroke, bearing down hard, was enough to sever it in at least one place, and he could feel the quick pop, the sudden lessening of tension. But already the chief was turning, bringing the axe down in sudden wild rage and fear, starting to whirl it in a blinding stroke.

Lance whirled as well, dived straight for the chief's legs. His shoulders struck, knocking them from under the other man, bringing him down ; the axe buried itself in the snow near by. Fighting the rope, Lance had his hands free, was on his feet again. He turned, grabbed wildly, and the axe was in his hands.

The whole thing had happened in a space of seconds, and so far there had been no outcry. Lance leaped, axe swinging, and the chief, scrambling to his feet like a clawing fox, trying desperately to draw his gun, dropped it instead and ran like a rabbit, yelling for help.

With a swoop, Lance had the gun in his own hand, threw a hasty shot towards the figure of the chief, disappearing in the night beyond the firelight, sent a second shot among the figures struggling in sudden wild confusion on the sacrificial altar.

The effect of the whining lead was a sobering one. They halted, turned a little stupidly, and raised their arms. Even the effect of the weed could not numb them to the danger of a gun, and they had been too badly confused to drag their own weapons in time. Lance held the gun on them, snapped orders.

"One of you boys back up to me, quick, and cut yourself loose." He held the axe in one hand, and a moment later one of the cowboys was free. "Now get the others loose, quick ! "

He was fairly fuming with impatience. The whole

thing was working fast and smoothly—far more so than he had dared hope for, but that was largely due to the drug, which had spoiled the sureness with which these maskers usually reacted to an emergency. Already they were being made prisoners, disarmed, the masks ripped away. But the one man whom he wanted above all others to get was escaping in the night.

There was no help for it, however. Randall had to be freed, their prisoners secured, and that, at best, took time enough for the chief to get outside the sink-hole. After that, on such a night as this, it would be hopeless to try and find him.

For the moment he had been checked, but the loss of this crew would mean little to him beyond the momentary disadvantage. The real brains of the whole scheme was still on the loose.

Dave Randall, a little pale now that the danger was over, shook his head as if to clear it.

"Thanks, Doc," he nodded. "That looked kind of bad there for a little while. But when you move, you don't lose any time."

"I was lucky," Lance said. "They were all too crazy to count, and he got careless for a minute. Now, do you know any of this crew?"

The cattleman was eyeing the captives shrewdly. Stripped of their masks, they were an ordinary-appearing enough set of cowboys. All of them, however, were strangers to Lance, and so, it appeared, were they to the rest of the crew.

Randall shook his head.

"All new to me."

Half dazed by the after-effects of the drug and the sudden turn of events, they were a cowed-looking bunch. Lance picked out the man who had been in charge, next to the chief.

"We want to know a few things," he said. "And you'd better tell us without beating around the bush. First off, who is that hombre you're working for?"

"Reckon you know as much about that as any of us, Doc. We'll tell you anything we can, but that's way beyond us."

Randall strode forward, big fists doubled.

"You'll tell, or I'll break your neck," he growled.

The other man did not flinch. He was a likeable hombre in some ways, Lance decided.

"Mister, after what's happened tuh-night. I sure couldn't blame yuh none if yuh did," he drawled. "But it happens to be the truth. That hombre hired us, or part of us, for I done most of the hirin' at his orders. But the only times I ever set eyes on him—if yuh could call it that—he's been wearin' that mask. And who he is, what he does, or what his name is, I don't know a thing more about than you do."

"That's a likely story," Randall retorted.

But to Lance it seemed likely enough. A logical story, in fact. This chief, the brains behind the whole diabolical plot, was taking no chances. He laid a hand on Randall's arm.

"Let me do the talking, Dave. It sounds like he was telling the truth. A few of you boys get busy and search this sink-hole, and make sure there's nobody else in here. Go two and two, and don't blunder into any traps. How about it ? Is there anyone else in here ?"

The prisoner shook his head.

"I reckon the chief's pulled his freight by now. There ain't nobody else."

"We'll want you to get us out of here."

"Sure. No reason why not, that I know of."

"How come you to be working for a murdering hound like that in the first place ?"

"We didn't figure on getting into anything like this, Doc. I was told that there'd be a little kidnappin', and so on, but that it was to throw a scare into some folks, with nobody to be hurt, and the whole thing shapin' up to stop this feud. The way he put it up, it sounded logical enough, and anyway, I didn't have much choice

—though if I'd known then what I do now, I'd have said no and hang the consequences.''

"What were they ? ''

"Well, I'm a cowpuncher, ordinary. But I got in bad with the law, down Rimrock way. And since the chief's run out on us, I'll tell yuh what I've suspected here lately. I think he got me drunk or doped or something, and then framed me. First thing I really knew about it, I sort of collected my wits to find that the law was lookin' for me for a stick-up. Mebby there was a stick-up, but yuh couldn't prove it by me—and I figgered then that I couldn't prove I hadn't had a hand in one, either.''

Lance nodded. It sounded like a frame-up.

"I figgered I'd have tuh leave that country, and the next thing I knew, somebody spoke from behind me—I'd been hidin' out in the brush—and I whirled, nervous as an old maid at her first proposal, tuh see a masked gent settin' there on a horse. That kind of give me a turn, too, but he calmed me down some, told me he knew the fix I was in, and said he needed a man like me for a job that was honest enough but had to be done quiet—and it was off in the middle of Desolate Range.

"I knew I'd be safe here, and he offered good pay, as well as givin' a nice story. So, as I wasn't in a fix to be too choosy, I took it. And up tuh to-night, except for that kidnappin', which, like I say, he explained logical enough, there didn't seem to be anything very bad about it. To-night, I just seemed to sort of go crazy for a while—I don't just understand how.''

"Marijuana weed in those cigarettes,'' Lance explained. "You were crazy.''

"That stuff, eh ? Man, she's potent. Make a jack-rabbit chase a panther ! The chief, he'd given us such smokes a time or so before, and then kind of hinted about sacrifices and stuff like that, which I suppose was to plant the idea in our minds. But we didn't take him very seriously, or cotton to the idea none, not when we

were in our right minds.''

''He was paving the way, all right. Do you know of any other hangout than this ? ''

''There's one back in the hills here a few miles. We were just short of it when yuh give us the slip the other day.''

The searchers returned to report that the sink-hole was empty. Within five minutes more they were on the way. Near the closed gates, the leader paused, pointed to a dark blot like a stain on the side of the cliff wall.

''Anybody lookin' for a knob tuh pull or a button to press, or anything like that, fools around that,'' he pointed out. ''But off to the right, about six feet—give a hard shove there.''

It was as simple as that. Some key was released, the gates swung open. Outside, Lance turned towards Windspur.

'' Aren't you going to have a look at that hideout ?'' Randall asked.

''No. If there was anybody there, they'd be gone ahead of us. And I have a hunch that the masker was telling the truth about Linda being back in town. We'll get there as quick as we can.''

''What about these fellows ? Do you believe their story ? ''

''Sounds logical. We'll hold them as witnesses—though I doubt if we ever need them. Once this is cleaned up, I think we can let them go.''

''If it's ever cleaned up,'' groaned Randall. ''What's it all about? I never did believe in Danny Darrel's curse. But it seems almost more logical than the way things have been happening lately.''

'' I'm afraid it's all too logical—so much so that it's more fantastic than ever,'' Lance sighed. ''Let's get to town.''

Ride as they would, it was well past midnight before they reached Windspur. Leaving some of the posse to take the prisoners to jail, Lance and Randall headed

directly for the doctor's office. The latter's face was dark with trouble.

"Doc, seems like I had a lot of things wrong," he sighed. "And I was right about you and wrong at the same time. After the things you've done—well, I'm followin' your lead, whatever you say. And don't think that I'm not grateful for what you've done."

"Forget it," said Lance. "We're all in the same boat together. And it looks like we were still a long way from shore."

"Talk about ridin' a sunfishin' cayuse and I can follow you better—but I get the idea."

The town, at this hour, was dark and bleak, somehow looking as though it had never been a place of human habitation. But up above the saloon a light burned, ominous in its possible implication. Lance took the steps two at a time, Randall close on his heels. Before he could reach the knob, the door opened, and the anxious face of Doc Griggs peered owlishly out.

"So you're back, Lance?" he greeted. "And you too, Randall? Man, am I glad to see you! Where've you been so long?"

"Out," Lance snapped briefly. "Linda——?"

"She's right here." Griggs was leading the way to a bed where Linda lay, white-faced. "Get hold of yourself, Randall. It's the same as that girl down in Rimrock, Doctor—her appendix. And acute, same as that one was."

CHAPTER XXII

AN IMMEDIATE OPERATION

It was acute. A swift examination was enough to convince Lance of that. Linda should have been

operated on hours before. Now, under the best of conditions, it would be a deadly grim game, with the holder of the scythe looking over the surgeon's shoulder at every move of the scalpel.

And to-night Lance was tired—desperately tired, as he had been on that other night, weeks before—it seemed like years, thinking back—that other night when the holder of the scythe had also stood behind him, his cold breath on Lance's neck. That night when he had won and Lance had lost.

The weariness seemed to flow through Lance like a leaden river in his veins. Linda! First her brother Sam, who had followed long after a baleful star, returning from nameless days to—what? The issue was yet to be settled. And to-night the black curse had almost taken Dave Randall himself. Now it was Linda—was there no end to the uncanny power of the thing?

He couldn't operate on Linda—not in his present condition, and certainly not in her present condition. It would be just a repetition of what had happened in Rimrock, all over again. And with Linda——

Looking down at her, the waxen pallor of those usually ruddy cheeks, the helplessness where she had been quick and eager in the service of others, he knew now what he had dared not admit to himself before, though it had been in the back of his mind, struggling up to full bloom in his heart through these wintry days. He loved Linda.

Almost savagely he swung on Doc Griggs, standing helpful but somehow futile as always at his elbow.

"Why the devil didn't *you* operate?" he demanded. "Hours ago?"

Griggs spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"It should have been done, of course," he agreed. "But there were three reasons why I didn't—all of them good. The first one, I've been out all day and most of the night, myself. I didn't get in to town till about half an hour ago. Second, I hated to tackle it in any case, for I'm not the man with a knife that you are, Lance,

and I know it. And third—it's about the same case as it was, down in Rimrock. I fell off my horse yesterday, when it slipped on ice, and sprained my arm, bad.''

He pushed up the sleeve, held it for Lance's inspection, wincing a little. It did look dark and discoloured.

''Right on top of it being broke, I can hardly use it. I wish I could—but you see how it is.''

Lance nodded. The old, black bitterness was welling up in him. Here was the black curse's fullest flowering. Somehow he knew it past doubting. He had to operate, little as he was in condition to do so.

For twenty hours he had been almost constantly in the saddle, his strength sapped by the bitter cold. Before that, a matter of five hours sleep, following an even more rigorous stretch, which had culminated in that soul-shattering operation on Linda's brother.

Even if he had been in the best of condition, there was the curse—and Linda's condition. But it was not a matter of choice. There was, he saw, hot water on the stove, everything was in readiness. Doc Griggs had done that much. Coldly, steady again, he stripped off his coat.

He turned, to find Dave Randall at his elbow. The cattleman's face was more haggard than he had ever seen it. If things were coming hard for Lance in these last few days, so were they hitting body blows at the boss of the Neckyoke.

''You going to operate, Lance ? ''

''Yes. It's her only chance, Dave.''

''Pretty bad, is it ? As bad as with Sam—last night?''

''Just about, I'm afraid, old-timer. But we'll scrap it out on this line.''

''I'm dependin' on you, Doc.'' Randall slumped suddenly, heavily, into a chair. ''Never thought I'd be depending so much on a Prescott—but your dad was always a man you could count on in a pinch. Anyway you've got Griggs to help you.''

Lance snapped a question.

"Where's Mrs. Tripp?"

"Gosh, I don't know," Griggs confessed. "She should be here, shouldn't she? Guess she must have gone out for something. Anyway, we can manage."

"Yes—we can manage." Lance turned to Randall. "Dave, you proved to be a mighty good assistant last night. You'll have to do the same thing again now."

Randall came to his feet, staring.

"I doubt if I can, Doc." His eyes ranged to the white form of Linda. "Anyway, here's Doc Griggs——"

"Doc Griggs," said Lance coldly, "is going to get back to his own room and get some sleep. And you're going to help me, Randall."

"But what's wrong?" Griggs pushed forward, perplexed. "I'm all right, Lance. I don't need the sleep any more than you do. I can stay and help——"

"Superstition, maybe," said Lance. "But it just happens that you were there at that other operation—and you couldn't operate then, either. She died—you said it was murder. To-night, I can't have you here in the room."

"Just as you say, Lance." Grigg's voice was quiet, his face impassive. "I guess I know about how you feel. And I can't blame you. I lost my head, that other night, said things I shouldn't have—things I didn't mean—yes, I guess I'd better be getting some sleep. Good luck."

He closed the door, and they heard his steps clumping down the icy stairs outside. The stove, well stoked, gave a cheerful warmth to the room, the panes of the window were heavy with frost. Randall was rolling up his sleeves as on the night before, washing his own hands.

"I didn't know what you had against Griggs," he nodded. "As it is, I don't blame you. I guess I'm ready. Seems like a man can find it in him to do a lot of things he never suspected he could, if he has to."

"We'll have to use chloroform," Lance said. "Last night, Sam was so deeply unconscious that nothing

could disturb him. It's different with her."

Linda was in a half-coma now. Lance cursed under his breath. That ride, after her abduction, had probably aggravated her condition a lot. He stopped suddenly, his face grimmer than ever, as a new thought struck him. Then, jaw granite hard, he set to work.

His hand, to-night was steady as a rock, his nerve as cool. The fatigue which had gripped him when he had first entered the room had been thrust aside, and again Dave Randall watched him, marvelling at the sureness of those slender surgeon's fingers, the impersonal way in which he worked. To-night, for this hour, he was something less and something more than a man—a skilled machine which did its work above the devastating power of emotion.

Lance's brows knitted as the operation proceeded. The appendix had not burst, as he had feared, but it was on the point of doing so, the whole condition was bad. But not hopeless. Far from that. And to-night his knife wasn't going to slip at a critical moment——

In the street below, dim and remote but growing louder, were voices. They beat on Lance's ears without penetrating to his consciousness. Then they seemed to have stopped in the street just below, the tones louder, gathering in intensity like a swelling storm. Lance frowned. Here he was at the most critical point in the operation, where he couldn't be disturbed.

And what the blazes was anybody, to say nothing of a group of men, doing abroad at this hour of the night, on such a night ? For now there were heavy treads on the stair outside, voices that rumbled on the same heavy tempo. Exclamations, a hand on the door.

Randall glanced up, startled, but Lance did not lift his eyes. He knew, none the less, when the door was pushed open, a rush of cold air flooding in, with men, booted and spurred, heavily muffled, standing there, crowding the doorway, trampling heavily in. And behind them, Doc Griggs !

"Shut that door!" Lance snapped. "Quick!"

"It's him, all right," someone growled. "The sneakin' skunk!"

"Shut that door and get out," Randall rasped, rising to his feet. "Damn you, can't you see that the doctor's in the middle of an operation?"

The door had closed behind the intruders, but they were making no move to leave. There were five of them, besides Griggs. And still without raising his eyes, Lance knew them—knew that they were not from Windspur, nor of Desolate Range. A coldness like that of the outer night seemed to creep through him, and he found it hard to steady his hand, to keep his attention riveted on what he must do in these next critical seconds.

"Looks like he is operating, all right," one of the newcomers growled. "Murderin' another woman, even if his licence was taken away from him. The hound!"

"Put the handcuffs on him, Sheriff," another one spoke up. "This time he can't get away."

"Men, for the love of God," Dave Randall implored. "This is my daughter. Get back! Griggs, what in heaven's name did you let these fools in for? Get them out, quick!"

"Why should I?" It was a new Griggs who was speaking now. "He's all they say—a murderer, without a licence to practise. The last girl he operated on, for the same thing, he murdered—just as he'll do to-night. This is the law, come up here from Rimrock to get him."

Lance's ears heard every sound. From the first, he had distrusted Doc Griggs, had known that, sooner or later, the man would seek to betray him as he had done before. His was a vicious, vindictive nature.

And now, pushing ahead of the others, coming up at this critical juncture in the operations, Doc Griggs was aiming to have his petty revenge, without regard to what it might mean to Linda Randall.

CHAPTER XXIII

UNMASKED AT LAST.

LANCE'S hand did not falter. This was the crisis—for Linda as well as himself. His eyes did not raise, but his voice crackled with sharp authority.

"Randall, if Van Scoy comes a step closer, club him with your gun!"

Van Scoy! The name stopped Griggs as though frozen, the others were inanimate as well. Randall bent a glance, sharpened by anger, on the other medico, and his big frame straightened with a jerk.

"By heavens, I believe he *is* Van Scoy!" he jerked out. "With those whiskers shaved off, I never knew him—but he's the treacherous rat who sneaked out of this country because the place was too hard for him!"

"Naturally he's Van Scoy," Lance agreed. "A tramp doctor, never staying long in any one place—they soon get next to him. Keep back, Griggs."

"This—this is preposterous," Griggs spluttered. "These men came here to arrest you, who've been cheating the law plenty long——"

"Sheriff," said Randall, and his voice had an ominous rumble, "this is my girl on the operating table, and if anybody interferes with Doc while he's finishin' the operation, I'll kill that man like the dog he is. If you fellows have any decency, keep back."

"Sure, we'll keep back," the Sheriff agreed. "We didn't know we was bustin' in on nothing like this, in the first place. Griggs, you come back here with the rest of us. Now, I'd kind of like to know what this is all about—this talk of Griggs and Van Scoy and all the rest. Strikes me as being mighty funny."

"There's not a word of truth in it, Sheriff," Griggs protested. "I——"

"You might as well save your breath," Randall warned. "Now that Lance has pointed it out, I can tell you're Van Scoy, all right—though I suppose that's no particular crime, changin' your name."

Lance drew a sigh of relief, straightened. He had fought for those added, critical moments which he had to have, and had gained them. What remained was routine. The operation had a good chance of being a success. But as soon as that was over, this posse from beyond the border would be after him again, egged on by Griggs. This was a fight to the finish, and that being so, there was no time like the present. His mind was keen, sharp as his scalpel.

"That's no crime, no," he agreed. "But there's some other things that come under that head. Randall, you'll remember that the chief, out at the sink-hole, told us that Linda was back in town here. That nothing had been done to harm her. That it wasn't necessary. He said that all that was needed was for nature to take its own course, as it was doing. And that time, Griggs," Lance swung suddenly, "I reckon you kind of overplayed your hand."

Griggs face had gone pasty now. He strove to speak, and for a moment no words came. The posse was suddenly quiet, watching tensely.

"You—you're crazy," Griggs gasped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about murder—and it's as well for the sheriff to listen to it, now he's here. A few days ago, one of the Broken Chain riders was brained with a neck-yoke. By somebody who was talking to him, whom he figured as being a friend. And one of the Neckyoke boys was throttled with a length of broken chain wrapped around his neck. And not a mark on him! He would have fought like a wild-cat against that, but for two things. In the first place, he figured that the man talking to him was a friend. In the second, that friend managed to give him a shot of some drug in the arm,

that made him unconscious, so that it was easy to wrap the chain about his neck without a struggle. The only man who could have done that was a doctor ! ''

"Mebby so.'' Griggs had regained control of himself, his voice was even now. "Seems to me I heard something about those two cases—and that it was *you* who claimed to have found both of the bodies. And you wanted for murder, back in Rimrock.''

"That'll take some explainin', too,'' the sheriff nodded.

"'Specially considerin' that poor devil from the Neckyoke, Baldy,'' Griggs added. "He'd had a hand in tryin' to kill you a spell back, Prescott—so it wouldn't be surprisin' if you wanted to get rid of him.''

"No, it wouldn't,'' Lance agreed. "Which was what you had in mind when you killed him. And that brings us back to the sink-hole, and the masked riders. And your statement about Miss Randall here, being back in town, waiting for nature to take its course. You kidnapped her. Then you saw, and only a doctor would know that—even a renegade medico like yourself—that she had a bad case of appendicitis. So you brought her back here and left here—figuring that she hadn't a chance to live. For you didn't intend that I should return to operate, and you wouldn't.''

"I tell you I couldn't operate,'' Griggs almost screamed. "There's no word of truth in all of it, except that. The way my arm is——''

" A little injection to make it look swollen and discoloured. Your arm's all right—just as it was all right down in Rimrock, though you claimed then that it was broken, and then had it heal good as new almost overnight. There's nobody but a doctor could have known about Linda Randall. You know that.''

Randall's face was a study in perplexity. He nodded. "Reckon you're right, Doc. But that makes him the chief of them masked hombres that aimed to cut my head off to-night—makes him——''

"Makes him the man who's been causing all this devilry, stirring up trouble between the Neckyoke and the Chain, any way he could find to do it, then coming down to Rimrock for a while to look after my case and get me in trouble. He's the black curse, at work. And he'd done some mighty effective work that way over the course of years. Using your son as the ghost of Danny Darrel, aiming to have you kill him the other night, and when you didn't do that——"

"Thanks to you!" Randall interjected.

"When you didn't do that, he shot Sam himself, aiming for you to find him dead! And it was close enough."

The sheriff moved ponderously.

"There's a lot uh this here that I don't understand much about, but it sounds like the devil," he rumbled. "I reckon yuh'll have to answer to these things, Griggs. If they can prove a tenth part of them——"

"They can't prove any of them," Griggs shouted. His eyes roved wildly around the room, like those of a trapped coyote. "He's making it all up to try and clear himself. I was out all day and half the night, calling on patients——"

"That part will be easy to prove," Lance cut in. "Send a couple of your men to his room in the Atlas hotel, Sheriff. Unless he's thought to get rid of them, there will be part of a pack of cigarettes left, which contain Marijuana instead of tobacco. Also——"

Panic leaped large in Griggs's eyes. Then he was turning, plunging wildly for the door, dodging one man, shoving another aside with the strength of desperation, jerking a knife and stabbing viciously at a third, sending him reeling back. From the doorway he shouted back a last word of defiance.

"If your son does live, Randall, he'll be a maniac! Better if you'd let him die!"

He was outside, clattering wildly down the stairs, running, with the sheriff and most of his posse already

in hot pursuit. Gunfire drummed on the night in spiteful bursts. A cold breath blew in from the open door, and Lance crossed swiftly to close it, turned then to examine the wounded man.

Dave Randall stood, staring around, a little bewildered by all that had happened. He glanced first at the doctor, busy staunching the wound, back to Linda, then sank rather weakly into a chair.

"Things are travellin' a little too fast for me, Doc, I guess." He took refuge in the commonplace. "How is he ? "

"Not bad. A nasty thrust, but just in the shoulder. It won't be serious."

"He seems to be out—and pretty bloody."

"Bloody enough. And he fainted."

Randall grunted.

"How about Linda ? "

"She should stand a good chance, now. That's one of the neatest operations I ever performed, if I do say it myself."

"And under about the toughest conditions, I'd judge. Doc, you're some man. Damned if you aren't. Now, who the devil *is* this Griggs hombre, who's Van Scoy and the masked chief—not to mention being the black curse and a few other things ? "

Lance met his gaze squarely. His lips twisted in a sardonic grin.

"Sounds crazy, don't it ? But it explains a lot of things. It took a long time for me to put two and two together—and it was mostly what he said, back in the sink-hole, about Linda, that made it all clear to me, once I got to thinking." His smile was quizzical. "Who do *you* think he is ? "

Randall shook his head.

"Me, I'm past thinkin'. I wouldn't have the least idea—unless he's Danny Darrel. Danny's been dead about a quarter of a century, but that wouldn't be much stranger than all the rest."

"No, it wouldn't be strange at all. He let it be known that he was dead—but it seems that was just another trick of his. Since it happens, beyond any doubt, that he *is* Danny Darrel. He's heavier, changed a lot with the years, hair dyed——"

Outside again, there was the tramp of feet on the stairs, a heavy tread, as of men who carried a burden. The sheriff pushed open the door, his men brought in that burden, dumped it, limp and bloody on the floor, with scant ceremony. Doc Griggs, *alias* Danny Darrel.

"We stopped him with a bullet," the sheriff reported. "Reckon he's finished."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE REAL DANNY DARREL

THERE was another clatter of footsteps on the stairs then Mrs. Tripp burst in, to stare wide-eyed and disapprovingly. She stopped, elbows jutting, gaze fixed on the figure on the floor, then appealed to Lance.

" What's been going on here, I don't know—and it don't look like it was a time for questions," she said tartly. "*He* sent me away on what turned out to be a wild-goose chase—and now he's here, shot, himself."

Lance was already kneeling beside Griggs. He looked up briefly.

"We'll explain things later, Mrs. Tripp. There's been a lot going on. If you'll heat more water, please——"

"I can do that," Mrs. Tripp agreed, and turned to obey. Randall stared in amazement.

"What are you going to do now, Doc ? Is he still alive ? "

" Yes. And not much more than that, from the

looks of things. Here, help me get him on the table.''

They did as he asked, but the sheriff was forthright in his opinion.

''Don't look to me like he'd be alive long—and if half you say about him is true, which his actions seem tuh indicate, then it's a damn good thing.''

Lance made no reply. He was examining the wound —a head wound, a good deal like that suffered by Sam Randall. He cleaned the blood away, shaking his head. The real Danny Darrel was unconscious, and if he left him alone, he would probably slip from that state straight into death.

If he operated, there was a chance—not a very good one, but still a chance to save him. But he had already performed one difficult operation to-night, when he had figured that to do so was beyond him. And a few short weeks back he had been thinking that he was all washed up and finished ! His jaw set a little harder, as he reached mechanically for his instruments.

''Funny, but I never guessed at him being Danny Darrel,'' Dave Randall commented, examining the face of the man before him with interest. ''He's changed a lot in these years, and I was sure, all the time, that Darrel was dead, of course. Lookin' at him close, I can see some signs of the old Danny, all right.'' Becoming aware of what the doctor was about to try, Randall's jaw slackened in amazement.

''You aren't aimin' to operate on *him*—to try and keep him alive, are you ? ''

'' Why not?'' Lance demanded. ''After all, that's my job.''

'' But—but—great snakes an' little owlets ! Him ! Let him die, if he ain't too ornery to do it. He's cheated the man with the scythe too long already.''

That seemed to be the consensus of opinion in the room, but Lance shook his head. He was cool and collected, his hand as steady as ever.

''We'll see what can be done,'' he said, and at the

finality in his tone the others ceased to demur. "Randall, you'd better get some sleep. You need it. The rest of you might do the same. Mrs. Tripp will help me."

"I sure will," Mrs. Tripp nodded. "Clear out, all of you." She paused for a moment to look down on Linda as the door closed behind them, a wistful smile softened her face for a moment.

"Poor lamb! Sleeping just as peaceful looks like! And she was terrible when Doc Griggs came in. I was scared."

"She'll be coming out from under the chloroform about the time I finish here, and she won't be so peaceful for a while, I'm afraid," Lance said. "So let's get to work."

"The whole town's awake, all stirred up. Well, let 'em stir. I told that sheriff to post a guard at the foot of those stairs and not let anybody bother up here, and I warned him that I'd give him a piece of my mind if they did."

"In that case, I'm sure we won't be disturbed," Lance nodded gravely. "He might risk bullets, Mrs. Tripp, but I'm sure he wouldn't knowingly risk that."

Mrs. Tripp looked at him suspiciously, snorted feebly, and watched him at work. Lance's hands moved as equally active in other fields.

Checking up, with what he had discovered to-night, the whole thing fitted together smoothly. Danny Darrel had pronounced his curse on the houses of the three men he hated. And then, with cold, calculated cunning, he had set to work, over the stretching years and with infinite patience, to make the curse come true.

Time had meant nothing to him. Rather, he had been in no hurry to carry the curse to its grim and inevitable end. Vengeance was all that he lived for, and when it was finished, life would lose its savour. Under a new identity, perhaps several at different periods, he had lived and worked, using other men to his purpose whenever

that could be done, acting directly himself when it seemed necessary.

There were still threads to unravel, but enough was already known to make things clear. His chief delight had been in keeping the Neckyoke and the Broken Chain continually at each other's throats, fostering hatred whenever reason seemed about to prevail. And there had been plenty of others hot-headed enough to do a lot of that work for him.

Outside, the town had quieted again, most of it had gone back to sleep. Lance straightened with a sigh, turned to wash his hands. A knock sounded, timidly, on the door. Mrs. Tripp opened it, to disclose the man whom the sheriff had posted at the foot of the stairway. He was short, bow-legged, with wistful blue eyes and a moustache rimed with frost, but for all that, he twisted his cap nervously in mittened hands as he met Mrs. Tripp's look.

"Uh—ma'am, I was just wantin' tuh ask—could I come in and kind of warm up ? " he pleaded. "I'm near froze, and there ain't been nobody around for near an hour——"

"Why you poor man, of course, come right on it," Mrs. Tripp exclaimed, aghast. "I didn't think of you getting so cold. Here, I've just been making a pot of coffee for the doctor. Have some, and then get along to bed."

" I'll sure be glad to," the guard admitted, drinking a scalding cup gratefully. He glanced towards the bed. " Uh—is he still alive ? "

" Still alive, and with a good chance to stay so, looks like," Mrs. Tripp nodded. "I tell you, there ain't a better doctor in the whole country than Doc Prescott. The man can perform miracles, and does."

"Looks like it. Uh—guess we sure made a mistake about him, down in Rimrock. Needed a good man like him there, too. Don't suppose he'd think of comin' back ? "

"I should hope not, after the way you hoodlums treated him. When it comes to that, we need a man like him up here, bad as anywhere I can think of. Men always trying to kill each other off, and only him to stand between them and their wickedness."

She ushered him out, turned to Lance.

"Doctor, you look plumb done up. Go to bed. I'll look after the patients."

Lance nodded, turned, stumbling a little, and paused beside Linda's bed. She stirred, sighed, and opened her eyes. For a moment they were blank, then they brightened, softened, at sight of Lance, and she tried to lift her arms. He could see the shadow of pain in the back of her eyes, and he stooped to her suddenly, cradled her head in his own arms.

"Oh Lance," she whispered. "Hold me tight!"

"I'll hold you tight, my dear," he whispered huskily. "Always."

"In that case," she sighed, "everything's all right."

Presently, at Mrs. Tripp's insistence, he stumbled off to bed in the next room, and then it was a new day, still leadened grey outside, but with the air definitely warmer, the promise of a break in the long spell of bad weather which had throttled the country.

Both his new patients were alseep, the others were doing nicely. Windspur buzzed with the events of the past hours. Mrs. Tripp had cooked a hearty breakfast on the stove, and Lance lost no time in doing justice to it. She watched him eat with grim satisfaction, turning occasionally for a glance into the next room where Linda and Danny Darrel still slept.

"You act like you enjoyed your vittles, which is the way I like to see a man eat. Peckin' at grub makes me sick! They say that that Ape Narcross got up yesterday and rode away, nobody knows where."

Lance frowned at his plate. Ape Narcross. It might be that Ape had been working for Danny Darrel, but whether he was or no, his was a dark and boding nature.

But if he was gone, that was that. Maybe he would obey Randall's order not to stop till he had left this range far behind.

"If you heard that, maybe you have more news from the Neckyoke. How is Sam ?"

"They said he seemed to be sleepin' peaceful, instead of being in that sort of coma."

That, at least, was encouraging. Lance arose from breakfast, crossed to the next room, and as he looked down at Danny Darrel, *alias* Doc Griggs, the sick man's eyes opened.

For a moment he looked at Lance, and understanding came to his face. With tentative fingers he felt his bandaged head, sat up in bed, smiling a little.

"Looks like you'd done a good job, Doc," he complimented. "And I judge that I owe you my life. Leaves me a little dizzy, but feeling good, and hungry. I'm a tough bird, when it comes to that."

"If you weren't, you wouldn't be alive to-day, Danny."

"Danny !" The old Doc's eyes grew dreamy. "It's been many a long day since anyone has called me that." He looked troubled. "But it's been my own fault, of course. I killed Danny Darrel, the old Danny, years ago—I've been a different man since then."

He looked at Lance, still puzzled.

"Things seem kind of funny, now that I'm getting my bearings. I sort of feel like the old Danny, somehow —the man I was when I first came to this country, along with Gunning and Dave and Reese—three of the best friends a man ever had. I feel the same as I did before I tried to curse and kill them. And then I went and studied to be a medico, just so I could do a better job at making life a burden for them. All those wasted, blasted years ! I can't understand it now."

"I think I can explain it, Danny." Lance sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've been told that you were different, after that accident with the bear—you were

hurt in that. Hurt worse than anyone guessed. There was bone pressure on your brain. I found that last night, and removed it when I operated. It must have been that which changed the whole course of your life. Sometimes a little thing like that will do it.''

Griggs stared in mounting amazement.

''Maybe that's it. I feel about as good as ever—looks like I wasn't hurt much. But I think differently. Glory be, if you have straightened me up.''

He stared a moment, sighed.

''But it's too late! The things I've done—the blood on my hands!'' He stared at them for a moment, as though seeing dark stains there. ''It's a long and evil tale. Just among other things, and you'll hate me for this, Prescott—I deliberately jolted your arm, when you were operating on that girl that night in Rimrock. It was murder, all right—and I was the murderer. I didn't care a thing about what happened to her. She was just a pawn in my game. I wanted to finish you—and so I killed her!''

CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF THE FEUD

SLOW, bitter tears squeezed out from between the tightly closed lids of the old Doc. His face was twisted like a wet dish-rag, sweating with agony. There could be no question of his remorse now for what was past —a past which he remembered as vividly as ever, but which had been committed by another self, a shadowy personality now strange and abhorrent to the old, gentle Danny Darrel of the early days.

''It's funny, how a little thing like that can change the whole course of a man's life,'' he mused. ''Some-

times we think we know a lot, we doctors, and all the rest of us. And then something comes along that we can kind of gnaw around the edges of, like a rat on a cheese big as a mountain. And we stand back a ways and look at the whole thing, and see just how much there is that we don't know a thing about.''

He shook his head.

"Like this matter of pressure on the brain. I never guessed that *I* had it—though I figured out that something of that sort ailed Sam Randall, after he was hurt, months back. He didn't remember who he was, or much of anything else—and I found I could manage him just as I pleased. With a little fixin' up, he looked a lot like I did, back in the old days—specially when I dressed him in the same clothes. And so I used him as the ghost of Danny Darrel. And I thought it was funny.''

Old Doc looked up at a heavy tread, but his eyes did not waver as they met the gaze of Dave Randall.

''Guess you heard what I said, Dave,'' he went on. ''I expect you'll take a lot of pleasure in watching me hang, one of these days. And I can't say that I'll blame you. I've got it coming.''

Dave Randall's usually forthright face was a little troubled now. For a moment, on the opposite side of the bed from Lance, he looked down at the face of his oldest friend and bitterest enemy, then sank into a chair.

''I don't know about that, Doc,'' he confessed. ''A while back, I'd have enjoyed it, I'll admit. But right now—well, I'm not so certain of some things as I used to think I was. Anyway, I'm glad that's not for me to settle. I'm not the law. Just thought I'd stop and see Linda a minute, Lance,'' he added. ''Then I'm headin' for the ranch.''

It was the next day that he was back again, this time with encouraging news. He stood looking down at Danny Darrel for a minute in silence.

''This thing about something affecting a man's brain,''

he said finally. ''I'd ha' said, a few days ago, that it was all hogwash. But since I've seen Sam—I'm sure kind of changing my mind about a lot of things.''

'' How is he ? '' Old Doc's lips quivered with his eagerness.

''He's awake—and in his right mind. Kind of puzzled, for he don't remember a thing about all these past months —and maybe it's as well that he don't.''

''You can thank Lance, here, for all that. He's some doctor—I always knew it, and it used to make me mighty jealous, along with all the rest. That means Sam will soon be as good as ever. And I'm mighty glad to hear it.''

'' I—uh——'' Dave Randall cleared his throat. ''Linda's doing fine, too. Way I feel now—oh, hell, Danny. The sheriff, he was asking me about you. I told him, far as I was concerned, that the explanation Doc give me, it seemed like you wasn't responsible for the things you'd done, and so far as I was concerned, I couldn't think of pressing charges against you. Think how I'd feel if somebody tried to bring charges against Sam for something that he didn't even know he'd done ! ''

The old Doc smiled.

''People have always figured you as pretty hard-boiled, Dave, and if you have been, it's what I've done that's made you so. Down under, you're the same old Dave you always were. As to Sam, you don't need to worry. He hasn't done anything bad at all. With me, it's a lot different case. I still remember, which Sam don't—and I've done plenty things that I'm responsible for. I'm willing to pay, too. But it makes it a lot easier, having you willing to forgive, Dave.''

Dave Randall reached out, his hand gripped the one on the bed. He stood up, his voice suddenly harsh.

''Reckon I'll be havin' a little chat with Linda. Mebby you're right, Danny—mebby you're wrong. But I won't be backin' any charges against you.''

The following afternoon, Lance rode out to the Broken Chain. Old Doc rode with him. Physically, save for a bandaged head, he was in pretty good shape again.

"I'm a tough old bird," he repeated. "And the trip won't hurt me. Wouldn't matter much if it did. Anyway, I want to see Reese MacVeigh, and tell him I'm sorry about things. Which is kind of lame, after all the things I've done to him, but it's all there is left. With the sheriff still hangin' around, he'll be taking me back, of course. And I've no kick coming on that. Only I want to see Reese first."

Lance nodded. He was still a little awed by what he had done. Two such operations, on Sam Randall and Danny Darrel. Both different, yet with points of similarity, and both successful. There was skill in it, of course, but there was something more—something far beyond anything that lay in him alone, and no one realized it more clearly than he did.

He had had a lot of luck, if one wanted to call it that, since coming to Windspur. The old feud was ended, the plague which had threatened to be so devastating was well past its peak. And to-day, for the first time in weeks, the sun was shining.

It was glaring on the endless snow fields, but somehow it brightened the country, hid some of the underlying bleakness. It was good to be alive, with trouble past——

"What's that?" Old Doc raised his head, eyes narrowing. A moment later both of them were galloping.

It was a thin streamer of smoke, until, coming to where they could look down into the valley that Reese MacVeigh had likened to paradise, the smoke was revealed as a crimson and sulphurous red. The ranch house was a roaring inferno.

Mavis, white-faced, was standing back from it with the crew, all watching helplessly. The other buildings were far enough away that there was no particular danger of the fire spreading, especially with the roofs snow-blanketed as they were. And there was nothing that

could be done to save the house itself.

Suddenly, as she looked up at their approach, Mavis glanced widly around, screamed.

"Dad ! " she cried. " Where did he go ? "

Swift alarm spread through the ranks of the onlookers. Reese MacVeigh, who had been with them a little while before, had disappeared. And at that moment, from somewhere inside the burning house, came the sharp, vicious crack of a gun.

The next moment, wordless, Danny Darrel, the Old Doc, had dived headlong into the smoke and disappeared.

Mavis turned to follow him. Lance leaped to grab her as a smothering wave of flame beat in their faces through the open doorway where only a moment before Doc Griggs had passed. Hysterically, Mavis fought for a moment, then subsided in a wild burst of sobbing.

"Dad's in there," she cried. "I know he is. Let me go."

Grave-faced, Lance carried her back from the furnace-like blast of the heat. Timbers were crackling, the flames mounting higher, a vast column of smoke rising like a signal of distress. Above the roar of it came again the crack of a gun.

Lance shook his head. To get in there now was out of the question. To get out looked to be equally hopeless. And then a hoarse yell sounded, a shrouded figure appeared at a broken-out window. Lance ran forward, a couple of the crew with him, grabbed what had been dropped in a heap at the foot of the window. Lance gave it to the cowboys, turned to follow, then swung back. It had not been the huddled figure of Reese MacVeigh who had called to them.

The heat was a searing, tangible thing which reached out hungry arms, as though, standing against the shivering cold for long weeks, the old house could not get enough warmth in its brief gesture of defiance against the crowding arctic. Just inside the window, slumped

on the floor, he found Danny Darrel, lifted him and leaped free as the whole side of the house seemed to crash out and down at him.

Lance stumbled, sprawling in the slush that had been snow a few moments before. Hands caught at him and lifted, pulling.

He got to his feet and pushed ahead, gulping in great breaths of the cold air beyond the swirling clouds of smoke. Off there, where they had laid him, Reese MacVeigh was already opening his eyes, revived by the clear air. For a moment he looked around dazedly, managed to sit up.

"I guess—I must have been knocked cold, in there," he said. "That Ape Narcross—fired the house and tried to kill me. He missed me in the smoke, but then he hit me over the head with his clubbed gun—and the fire was right behind us, all around—seems like that's all I remember."

Aside from the blow over his head, and singed eyebrows and moustache, Reese MacVeigh would soon be all right. With a thunderous roar, the whole house seemed to fall in, the flames leaped higher in one last engulfing triumph. Ape Narcross had not come out.

Lance crossed to where the still figure of the Old Doc lay. Somehow, Danny Darrel had gone through fire as well as smoke, had performed the almost superhuman feat of bringing Reese MacVeigh out alive and unharmed. And in there he had met and mastered the Ape as well.

The doctor bent lower. The smell of flame and its mark were upon Danny Darrel, but a look of peace was upon his face.

CHAPTER XXVI

OLD FRIENDS REUNITED

REESE MACVEIGH shook his head, climbing down a little stiffly from the wagon seat, looking about in the light of the lanterns at the buildings of the Neckyoke.

"Long time since I've been here, Dave. A long time. And it's right hospitable of you to take us. Doc, here, he insisted that me and Mavis had to come and stay here a spell. Which is sure nice for Mavis, but me, I ain't an invalid any more. Could have bunked with the rest of the boys, just as well as not——"

"There's plenty of room here for both of you, and we're mighty glad to have you," Randall overrode him. "Gives me a little chance to kind of make up for being so bullheaded all these years, Reese. I always was worse than you——"

"Reckon we was both plenty stubborn," MacVeigh nodded. "But that's over with. How's Sam ? Mavis, she's been right anxious to get over and see him——"

Not waiting for the rest of them, Mavis had hurried on ahead. They came to the door of Sam's room, looked in, and turned hurriedly away. Dave Randall was chuckling, though there was a suspicious moisture about his eyes.

"Guess they don't want to be interrupted, right now," he said. "Come on and wash up. Supper'll be ready pretty soon. Doggone it, Reese, what stubborn, blind old fools we've been, never to guess how them two felt about each other. Don't know of any girl I'd as soon have for a daughter, though—which is right handy, seein' as I'll be losin' Linda to Doc, here. Darned if they ain't gone and fell in love, too."

Reese MacVeigh grinned. It was a rather strained look, with his eyebrows and moustache singed as they

were, but its quality was not to be doubted.

"Guess you must have been blind, Dave. I could see that a couple of years ago. Always liked Sam. I used to hope that'd settle the feud—till he disappeared. And it was Ape Narcross shot him in the first place—Ape told me that, just before he figured he was going to finish me off."

"Ape, eh?" Randall's face darkened for a moment, cleared again. "Well, there's some things we might as well start to forget, and that's one of 'em. Come on, let's eat. Me, I'm hungry enough to eat a horse and chase its rider. Seems like I've been missin' out on about half my meals lately, same as Doc here."

"Well?" Mrs. Tripp set the coffee-pot on the back of the stove, and turned, arms akimbo, her whole attitude uncompromising. "If you've got anything to say, why don't you say it? Or is your mouth stuffed too full of them biscuits?"

"Now, ma'am—Mis' Tripp, is that fair, I ask yuh? Course, them *are* mighty good biscuits—best I ever et, bar none. They do go right to the spot—special after yuh've stood out on a stair till you was all frost-bite."

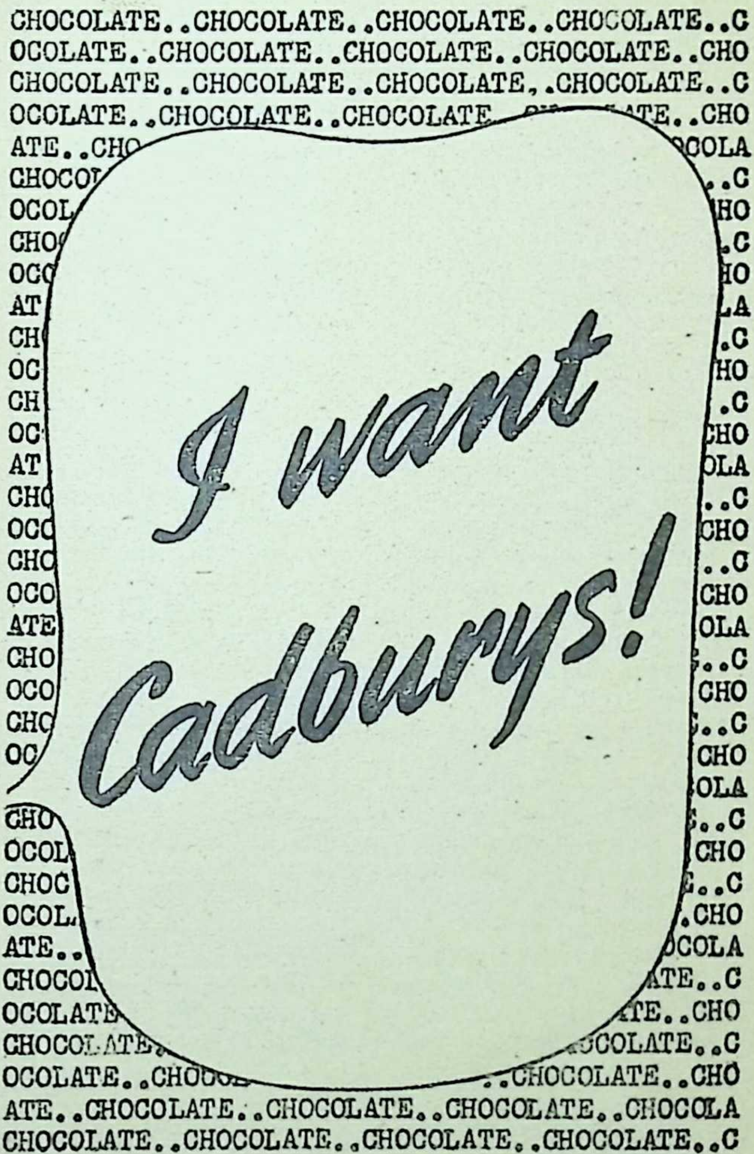
"I'm right sorry about that, as I've told you before." Mrs. Tripp pushed the plate across to him again. "Here, have some more. You ain't et but eleven, so far."

"Gosh, seems like not more'n two-three, the way they melt in yore mouth—uh, well, fact is, the sheriff, he's fixin' tuh start back for Rimrock in the mornin', and I—I s'pose I'll have tuh go along with him. Bein' a deputy that way, and all."

"Oh, you're a deputy, are ye?"

"Kind of, yeah. I do the jailin' down at Rimrock. Have a nice place of my own right next to it. I—uh, what I was startin' to say was, I don't know that I ever told yuh my name, did I now?"

"Why, land sakes, I don't know's you did, Mr. Jenkins—except just that."


CHOCOLATE..CHOCOLATE..CHOCOLATE..CHOCOLATE..C
I want Cadburys!

Mr. Jenkins gulped another biscuit.

"Uh—well, what I was startin' to say was, er—my name's Obadiah—Obadiah Jenkins."

He paused, regarding her hopefully. Mrs. Tripp had sunk into a chair, staring.

"Obadiah ?" she repeared, in almost a whisper.

"Yeah. Obadiah——"

"Obadiah. My paw, he used to sing a song, I recall, back when he'd had a few drinks too many in him. Let's see now, how did it go." And Mrs. Tripp sang, in a high, rather quavery voice :

"Said the old Obadiah to the young Obadiah,
'Obadiah, Obadiah, I am dry.'
Said the young Obadiah to the old Obadiah,
'Obadiah, Obadiah, so am I.'"

"Yeah. Obadiah. Sounds kinda terrible, don't it ? But I—uh, what I was startin' tuh say was, Mis' Tripp, Jenkins ain't such a bad name and uh—yuh wouldn't just need call me Obadiah——"

"What in the name of goodness are you getting at, Mr. Jenkins ?"

"Well, uh, I——" Mr. Jenkins helped himself unostentatiously to another biscuit. "I—what I was startin' tuh say was, Amanda—yuh don't mind if I call yuh that, I hope—but with the Doc and Sam Randall and all, fixin' tuh get hitched in double harness, I—uh, I was just thinkin'—I, what I was startin' tuh say——"

"Why, Obadiah Jenkins !" Mrs. Tripp coloured suddenly and glanced away. "'Obie' wouldn't be so hard to call you, now would it ?"

"You—yuh mean yuh will, Mis' Tripp ? Gosh, I—I——"

"Seems to be the fashion, these days—why, Obadiah Jenkins ! You are kind of sudden when you do start, ain't you now ? There, set down and clean up the rest of the biscuits, there ain't more'n a dozen left."

THE END